



A THOUSAND LIGHTS



Greetings

The team at A Thousand Lights Zine would like to extend our most heartfelt thanks to everyone involved in this project. From its inception in the midst of the chaos that was 2020, we've worked hard to bring this zine to life, and now here it is in all its glory.

Our contributors have poured themselves into these pages, and we're excited to share that effort with you. So sit down, put your feet up, and immerse yourself in this MDZS New Year celebrations!

A Thousand Lights Zine Mod Team

世事皆千人千言千面

**Everyone has a thousand personalities
and a thousand different faces.
Earthly matters are all influenced by a
thousand opinions. It is hard to judge
who is right, who is wrong,
what is black, what is white.**

—Lyrics from Qu Jin Chen Qing

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年獸有魏

THE NIAN-SHOU HAS CAPTURED THE YOUNG AND PROMISING WEI WUXIAN!

—ELLIE

Nian-shou are great creatures – if you have to get injured at all on a night hunt, you'd be lucky to get bitten by one. Who can tell me why?

Close enough – good guesses, all of you. It's because there's a natural anaesthetic coagulant in its slaver. Your chances of bleeding out are slim to none, and you'll barely even feel a thing.

Lan Wangji awakens with a sharp inhale.

The forest is quiet, the absence of nocturnal life creating a vacuum of silence so heavy that the pressure proves almost unbearable.

He remembers a savage bite that came out of nowhere, latching onto the very same leg that had been crippled by the Wens a lifetime ago. The creature had shaken him hard, sending him and Wei Ying crashing into the trees.

He remembers a visceral crack and Wei Ying's strangled cry, the moment of abject horror when he realised that he had been thrown directly into Wei Ying and broken *something*.

But the beast's saliva must've carried some form of anaesthetic, because he remembers nothing beyond that.

Lan Wangji breathes through the residual dizziness as he levers himself into a sitting position. There is a strange tightness that pulls across his chest with every inhale, and when he looks down, it's to the sight of talismans drawn haphazardly all over his bare skin, the dried blood flaking off with every movement.

When he exhales, it comes out in a quiet, shuddering breath.

He recognises the bold strokes, though not the way the symbols curl around each other's edges to create an amalgamation of protective talismans that should have been impossible, if it weren't for the evidence left on his skin.

There is only one person who could have invented a protection this complicated on the fly. He looks down at his mauled leg and notes the coagulating effect of the beast's saliva with despair – if the copious amount of blood staining his skin had not come from him, it could only have come from one other source.

Tamping down the dread that threatens to choke him, he decides to take stock of the information he has on what happened, because there is no way that Wei Ying, with all his ingenuity, would not have found a way to leave a message pointing him in the right direction.

True enough, amidst the messy strokes drawn on his chest, Lan Wangji finds and traces two simple characters left as a message for him –

Nian and shou.

Nian-shou hibernate for most of the year, so their dens are chosen very carefully for security and longevity. Who can tell me some of the characteristics of a Nian-shou's den in the different regions?

Lan Wangji shakes off the light-headedness pulling at him as he walks through the silent forest. He drags his incapacitated leg behind him with a heavy limp, heedless of the loud rustling of fallen leaves as he cuts a wide swath through the litterfall on the ground. He steadfastly ignores the sluggish return of sensation in his deadened leg prickling at the edge of his consciousness.

Let's start with the Gusu mountains then - shall we, Lan Zhan?

Ignoring the myriad of sensations fighting for dominance in his mind, Lan Zhan responds to Wei Ying's question in his head and recites what he had said when called upon to answer Wei Ying during his lecture so many days ago.

The heterogenous Nian-shou have sub-species that are native to mountainous regions like Gusu - these mountain-ranging beasts have a preference for quiet isolation, and often den down in caves, rock crevices, and burrows far from any settlements.

Very good, as expected from the exemplary Second Jade of Lan. And how can we track these creatures on night hunts?

Prominent incisors are a defining characteristic of the mountain-ranging sub-species, which prevents the beast's jaws from closing fully. Coupled with the fact that Nian-shou typically carry prey back to the den in open jaws, following a trail of the beast's slaver in either direction should lead directly to its lair.

Perfect, now come and find me, Lan Zhan.

Lan Wangji blinks at the sudden non sequitur, certain that had not come from memory. Distracted, he stumbles over something in the darkness and falls, hands sinking into the mulch of half-rotted leaves.

He lifts his palms, thick strings of viscous fluid clinging to them. Clenching his fists, Lan Wangji brings a hand close, noting the clouded, grey-green tinge to the translucent mucus.

Scarcely letting himself hope, he takes a deep breath and feels along the ground in search of another pool of slaver, anything to indicate that he's well on his way to being reunited with Wei Ying.

It takes several long moments before he finds what he's looking for.

When the tips of his fingers sink into another patch of congealed slaver, all the breath in his body leaves him in a rush of relief.

There you go.

He can barely distinguish the voice in his head from Wei Ying's, though he can picture the pleased little smile that would have curled Wei Ying's lips if he had been there with him.

With the assurance that he's on the right track, Lan Wangji lets go of the trepidation he's been keeping at bay, fluttering in his chest, and feels his resolve settle into certainty.

I'm coming, Wei Ying.

Despite knowing that he is making his way directly back to Wei Ying's side, or perhaps because of it, the journey feels interminable.

Every slow drag of his incapacitated leg is as frustrating as every discovery of a fresh pool of slaver is gratifying, both playing their parts in bringing him one step closer to Wei Ying.

He has no way of knowing how long it's been since the Nian-shou took Wei Ying from him, but by his estimates, it could not have been more than two shichen since their separation, though it feels much longer than that since he last laid eyes on him.

Finally, Lan Wangji catches the distinctive scent of beast-marked territory, the sour-bitter tang weighing heavy on his tongue with every inhale. Bending close to the ground, he finds further signs of a territorial beast staking its claim in the deep gashes raking the earth.

In the darkness of night, the cave's entrance is well-concealed amongst the foliage. He might have walked right past it, if it weren't for the softest of whimpers echoing from within the dark cavern.

Suppressing the urge to call out Wei Ying's name lest he places him in further danger, he searches for a fist-sized stone off the beaten path and tosses it into the darkness of the cavern with a quick movement, pausing with bated breath as it clatters loudly against the cavern walls.

The whimpers cut off almost immediately, and all is silent except for the distant clatter of the stone making its way into the cavern.

Once he's certain there is no movement from within that could be attributed to the Nian-shou's presence, he makes his way into the cavern with a swiftness that belies his injury.

When he sees the long length of a red ribbon snaking across the ground like a lifeline, Lan Wangji's eyes trace the length of it all the way back to its owner and feels his heart stutter to a stop in his chest.

Wei Ying lies motionless, nothing but a dark pool of robes on the ground.

"Wei Ying!" His beloved's name is torn from him in a desperate cry, the sound reverberating through the cavern.

Heedless of the danger, Lan Wangji throws Bichen down next to Wei Wuxian and pulls the unconscious man half into his lap, cradling the precious bundle close. Cupping Wei Ying's beloved visage in a broad palm, he tilts his head up gently for a closer inspection.

Even under the faint illumination of the moonlight, Wei Wuxian's face is so pale that it glows. But the thin clouds that puff from his nose with every wispy breath are unmistakable.

Wei Ying is still alive.

He feels the pressure in his chest ease a little in relief and makes a note to tease Wei Ying about how he's bad for his heart when they finally get out of this dreadful situation.

In the face of his overwhelming worry, Lan Wangji only belatedly registers the quiet yelp that had come from whatever had tumbled from Wei Ying's arms when he'd pulled the other man to lie on his lap.

Lighting a talisman, Lan Wangji comes face to face with a grubby little street urchin, who scrambles from where he had fallen to cling to Wei Wuxian's other side.

Though wide-eyed and mute with fear, the boy's grip is tenacious, and he recognises the look of fierce determination in the downturn of the child's lips. He will not be able to move the child from Wei Ying's side and truly has no inclination to, not with how fiercely protective the boy appears to be.

"Are you injured?" Lan Wangji asks instead.

The child shakes his head, but points silently at Wei Ying's arm, the one he had grabbed and jostled in his rush to confirm that Wei Ying was still alive and breathing, a wordless plea for help in his eyes. It was only then that Lan Wangji realises the jagged shard of bone jutting out from the arm, gleaming wet with blood even under the weak moonlight filtering into the dim cave.

Biting back a curse at his oversight, he prepares to set the splintered bone, tearing off part of his sleeve and bundling it to shove into Wei Ying's mouth, preventing him from biting down on his tongue. Before he can ask for it, the boy has scampered off to somewhere else in the cave and brought back branches of similar lengths suited for splinting.

"Thank you." He takes a moment to grasp the child by his shoulder, the entirety of his gratitude infused into those simple words.

The child only nods distractedly, eyes still intensely focused on Wei Wuxian, pushing at his hand as though to urge him to move faster.

Turning back to Wei Ying, he wastes no time in straightening the broken arm bones, latching them back together with a grinding snap. He pulls off his forehead ribbon and holds one end between his teeth as he uses it to bind the splints to the wound. All this while, he channels his spiritual energy into Wei Ying, cycling it through his meridians and urging the wound to slow its bleeding and mend.

The wound is deep. Lan Wangji pours all of his reserves into Wei Ying's healing, hovering in a state of half-meditation for an indeterminate amount of time.

A state that's only broken by a quiet whisper of his name.

"Lan Zhan."

When his eyes open, it's to the sight of Wei Ying's beautiful grey eyes, soft with relief.

"Lan Zhan, you're here."

He bends close and lets the sweep of his hair conceal them for the barest of moments as he brushes a dry kiss over Wei Ying's temple. "Mn, Wei Ying's teachings are thorough."

Wei Wuxian tilts his head into the kiss, the beginnings of a cheeky smile curling his lips as he glances at Lan Zhan from under his lashes. "Who would've thought that the Chief Cultivator's penchant for sitting in on his husband's lectures to junior disciples would come in handy on a night hunt like this?"

"Wei Ying's mind is brilliant," he murmurs, unabashedly indulgent in his relief at finding Wei Ying safe and well. "Your lessons, constructive." As he speaks, he guides Wei Wuxian's good hand to the boy, knowing that his attention would soon turn to seek for the child.

"A-Tao," Wei Wuxian breathes out in a sigh of relief, as he pats him gently on the head, "didn't I say Hanguang-jun would come for us?"

The boy nods obediently with a quiet, "Mn, Xian-gege."

When Wei Wuxian shifts to face the child more fully, Lan Wangji stifles a sharp inhale at the sudden jolt of pain as his wounded leg is jostled. In his earlier haste to get to Wei Ying, he had completely missed the anesthetic effect of the beast's slaver wearing off.

Wei Ying turns back to him, eyes sharp. Before he can say anything, Lan Wangji interjects. "What happened?"

Shooting him a warning glance, Wei Ying keeps his explanation short.

"After the Nian-shou took you out, I set off a signal flare that got it in one of its eyes, which gave me some time to draw the warding talismans on you." Wei Ying's fingers trace the intricate patterns peeking out from under his collar. "But it recovered faster than I expected and got to me before I could erect a barrier around us."

"The barrier should have been your first priority," Lan Wangji says, voice firm in chastisement.

"Now, Lan-er-gege," Wei Wuxian pitches his voice low and sweet, "what would this weak, fragile man do without his Hanguang-jun?" He presses a finger hard to Lan Wangji's chest for emphasis, gaze sharp with ferocity.

Before Lan Wangji can respond, Wei Wuxian gets distracted by a tug on his sleeves and a quiet, "Xian-gege."

With a look that says they'll talk about this later, Wei Wuxian turns back to the child. Sitting up with some difficulty, he holds his good arm out and beckons for the boy to come to him.

Lan Wangji savours Wei Ying's warmth nestling against his chest as he shifts to settle them between the bracket of his thighs, giving Wei Ying the support he needs to hold the child close.

When Wei Ying leans further into his hold, resting a cheek on his shoulder, Lan Wangji lets himself imagine that

this is what life with Wei Ying and A-Yuan could have been like, back at the Burial Mounds all those years ago.

"It's going to be all right, A-Tao. Didn't I say that Hanguang-jun is the best cultivator of our generation? He'll get us out of here." Wei Wuxian soothes, rocking the boy as best he can with one arm bound in a splint.

Even with the aborted argument between them, Lan Wangji cannot help but feel warm at his husband's show of steadfast belief in him.

A-Tao looks up at Wei Wuxian's reassuring smile and mumbles around the thumb in his mouth, "Like in your story with the Xuanwu?"

Only Wei Ying could find time between being thrown like a ragdoll and losing consciousness from blood loss to tell stories of their youth to soothe a frightened child.

There is a long pause before Wei Wuxian's head whips around to face Lan Wangji so quickly that he nearly knocks into him. It is Lan Wangji's intimate familiarity with Wei Ying's antics that has him leaning back in time to dodge the collision with ease. "That's it, Lan Zhan!"

"The chord assassination technique would work - if you anchor your guqin strings to the cavern walls," Wei Wuxian's hands gesture animatedly, illustrating the scene, "you can trap the Nian-shou at the entrance and finish it off like the Xuanwu!" By the end of his explanation, he's almost crowing with delight.

"Mn," Lan Wangji agrees, materialising his guqin and beginning the task of unwinding the seven strings with a remarkable conscientiousness.

Wei Wuxian turns back to the child and tweaks his ear affectionately. "Good thinking, A-Tao. Aren't you a smart boy?" The child beams shyly at the praise, even as his eyes are drawn to Lan Wangji and his guqin.

Noticing his interest, Wei Wuxian's eyes soften and take on a teasing glint. "Now, don't go thinking the guqin is better than a dizi. When you come back to Gusu with us after all this is over, I'll show you what it's like to play the superior instrument."

Lan Wangji hums in disapproval.

The sound of Wei Ying's laughter washes over him as he continues to conjure up reasons as to why a dizi is preferable to the guqin, most of which would not hold weight in any academic discussion. He enjoys seeing Wei Ying in his element, though the few times he glances up at the pair seated in front of him only shows A-Tao listening attentively to Wei Ying's ridiculousness.

When he is finally done and levers himself to his feet, his uncharacteristic shakiness doesn't go unnoticed by Wei Ying.

"Lan Zhan, your leg—"

"—will hold," he interrupts, "This is the fastest way out of here."

Wei Wuxian nods, reluctant. "If the pain gets any worse..."

Lan Wangji runs a gentle hand down the side of his beloved's dirt-smudged face. "I will be fine."

Wei Wuxian lets himself nestle into his husband's palm for a bit, before nudging him towards the entrance to the cavern with a gentle word of warning. "Be safe, we'll be waiting."

Without a reliable way to accurately determine the time that has passed since he found Wei Ying, Lan Wangji can only move as quickly as he can to set a trap for the Nian-shou using Gusu Lan's famed chord assassination technique.

He winds his guqin strings around the strongest stalactite and stalagmite formations within the cavern, pulling the string tension tight enough to slice through the thickest of skins - at least, anything short of the Xuanwu's hide. The silken threads sing under Lan Wangji's masterful hands as he strums the web to listen for weaknesses in the formation.

And then they lay in wait, the prey becoming the predator.

Lan Wangji sits and meditates, processing the intensifying burn in his leg and slotting it away to be examined later. He listens as Wei Ying weaves a mesmerising tale of their night hunts, clearly a continuation of an earlier thread of storytelling from before he lost consciousness, playing up Lan Wangji's heroics to a quietly amazed A-Tao until he cuts in with an exasperated, "Wei Ying."

"I'm only telling A-Tao the truth," Wei Wuxian crows, unrepentant. He then continues to tell their stories, each re-enactment wilder than the last, as though daring Lan Wangji to cut in and disappoint the boy who was progressively getting more enamoured with the tales of their exploits.

It takes less than a shichen before they detect movement just beyond the cave's entrance.

"Wei Ying." Lan Wangji's tone is pitched low, travelling far within the cavernous walls.

Taking it for the warning that it is, Wei Wuxian abruptly falls silent and tucks A-Tao's face into his chest, arm folding around him in a warm embrace as he covers the child's ears.

A-Tao's hands grip tight in his robes, almost trembling at the sudden spike in tension. He lays a cheek on the boy's head, stroking gentle fingers over the chub of his cheek in comfort.

For all their worry, it takes remarkably little effort for Lan Wangji to lop the beast's shaggy-maned head clean off its body as it prowls back to its lair. It leaves him standing nonplussed over the beast's fallen form for a long moment, which sends Wei Wuxian into sudden peals of laughter, the easy victory lowering his guard.

"My hero," he swoons, getting a bemused A-Tao to clap along with him in delight.

As Lan Wangji makes his way back to their side, he falters as the searing pain of his injury makes itself known again. He's grateful that Wei Ying misses his ungainly stumble, with his eyes crinkled in mirth.

A-Tao, however, observes his moment of weakness, and tugs plaintively again at Wei Wuxian's robes. "Xian-gege," he says seriously, fluttering his fingers in a mimicry of what Wei Wuxian had done earlier, when regaling him with the story of the juniors' night hunt at Mo Manor and the faithful signal flare that had brought Lan Wangji back to him all those years ago.

Sobering, Wei Wuxian nods thoughtfully. "You're right, A-Tao," he turns to Lan Wangji with a cheeky grin, "Lan Zhan, do you happen to have a spare signal flare we could use?"

Lan Wangji levels a wry look at him.

"You're right, I really should get around to stocking some of my own." Wei Wuxian pats around the pockets of his robes with a put-upon sigh. "Since I used yours the first time round, I guess we're down to nothing."

Amused by his lover's antics, Lan Wangji suppresses a heavy exhale and points out, "Wei Ying, I've always made sure to stock your qiankun pouch with an extra signal flare."

"What? No way, I don't carry a qiankun pouch."

Lan Wangji reaches into Wei Ying's robes and pulls out a Gusu Lan embroidered pouch. "You don't, but I put it into every one of your robes, just in case you are ever in need."

Wei Wuxian stares wide-eyed at the silver-white qiankun pouch for a long moment, still surprisingly pristine after their night's activities, before leaning forward in a sudden burst of speed to press a quick, impulsive kiss to the corner of Lan Wangji's lips, uncaring of the flush that colours his husband's ears.

"What would I do without you, Lan Zhan?" he says fondly, even as he fishes out the flare from the pouch and holds it up to A-Tao.

"What do you say, Taotao? Do you want to give it a try?" A-Tao nods, earnest. "Well then, we'll have to ask Hanguang-jun very nicely then, since he's the only adult with two functional arms right now."

Taking his advice seriously, A-Tao takes the flare in both hands and presents it to Lan Wangji with the solemn expression on his small face. "Please."

Lan Wangji levels another look at Wei Ying, who only gives him a guileless smile in response.

Under no normal circumstances would Gusu Lan allow a child to be in charge of setting off signal flares, but then again, no one from Gusu Lan would classify Wei Ying as a normal circumstance.

"Come," he beckons the boy and brings him to the entrance of the cavern, explaining the purpose of the signal flare and its mechanics and showing him how to safely handle and set off the flare as Wei Ying trails along behind them. With the child's hands ensconced in his, they set off the flare and watch as the Gusu Lan sect symbol hangs shimmering in the dark night sky for a long while before slowly dissipating.

Looking down at the innocent wonder on A-Tao's face, Lan Wangji is reminded of when A-Yuan was a child – he, too, had taught his son many of his first lessons in cultivation, and in return had been privy to similar looks of wonderment each and every time A-Yuan had learnt something new.

"If you wish," Lan Wangji says, broaching the topic carefully, resting a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder, "You may come back with us to Gusu and learn the ways of cultivation."

A-Tao stares at him wide-eyed before turning to Wei Ying, who only smiles, having heard everything. "I told you, it doesn't matter if all you've known is the streets. You'd be welcome at Gusu Lan."

The child nods shyly and hides his face in Lan Wangji's voluminous robes.

"Well, aren't you a magnet for strays like us?" Wei Wuxian teases, leaning up to brush a kiss on the tip of his reddened ear, resting a hand on A-Tao's head. He sways a little mid-stretch, struck by a sudden wave of light-headedness, overbalancing and stumbling bodily into Lan Zhan instead.

At the added pressure of Wei Ying's weight on him, Lan Wangji feels his wounded leg weaken and tenses up, trying to stay upright.

The movement goes unnoticed by Wei Wuxian, whose body has finally decided to acknowledge that it cannot run on empty forever, with the heaviness of blood loss weighing down his limbs.

Lan Wangji reaches out and pulls him close with an arm curled around his waist, guiding them both into a sitting position on the ground.

With a gentle grasp on the wrist of his injured arm, Lan Wangji starts feeding spiritual energy into his meridians once more.

When Wei Ying tries to pull away in protest, he only tightens his hold with a curt, "You're bleeding, be still."

Wei Wuxian valiantly ignores the thick slide of blood pooling in the cradle of his palm. "It'll be fine," he slurs a little, tongue stumbling over the words, "don't worry about it."

"Why did you not tell me the bleeding had started anew?" Lan Wangji feels his heart miss a beat when his husband slumps further into his hold. "Wei Ying!" His voice thrums with an urgency he cannot hide.

A-Tao, who had tucked himself into a small ball with a corner of Wei Wuxian's robe held tight between two fingers and stayed out of their way, flinches at the cry.

"Really, Lan Zhan," Wei Ying eyes him with a soft huff, "stop worrying the boy." He gives A-Tao a reassuring pat with his good hand.

Biting back the urge to tell him that the child would have nothing to worry about if Wei Ying did not insist on treating his health in such a cavalier manner, Lan Wangji focuses his attention on stabilising Wei Ying's condition.

The extreme pallor of his complexion, previously hidden in the shadows of the cave, improves with every bit of spiritual energy that Lan Wangji pours into him.

Eyeing the improvement, Lan Wangji continues, ignoring the steadily growing burn in his leg as he continues to channel more energy away from his body's attempts to stabilise his injury and into Wei Ying's meridians to stop him from bleeding out.

He's scraping at the last bit of his reserves when Lan Xichen arrives, Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi at his heels.

"Ah, Sizhui, Jingyi – everyone's here?" Wei Wuxian almost lifts his splinted arm to wave until the pain of jostling it stops him. Mustering a cheerful grin, albeit a little dimmer than usual, he calls out, "You woke the children up just to come get us? Xichen-ge, you shouldn't have."

Although Lan Wangji is gratified to see Wei Wuxian gain his second wind, he wishes he would conserve his energy for the healing his body needs.

Lan Xichen smiles at his brother's precocious husband, though his eyes remain tight with worry, even as Lan Jingyi protests loudly in the background at being referred to as children.

"It is good to see you well, if not completely free of injuries, A-Xian." He somehow manages to sound both chiding and indulgent all in the same breath. Wei Wuxian pouts at the implicit reprimand.

Lan Xichen turns to his brother, an undertone of worry threaded through his voice. "Wangji, we saw the signal flare – is everything all right?"

Lan Wangji will not deny that his brother is a welcome sight – the habits of a lifetime are hard to break, and Lan Huan has always been the harbour he turns to when he can no longer go on alone.

"Xiongzhang." The relief in his voice is clear as he stands so he can transfer his precious husband to his elder brother, blinking away the bright sparks that streak across his vision at the searing agony of the movement. "Wei Ying needs medical attention immediately."

Lan Xichen nods, taking Wei Wuxian carefully into his arms despite the man's protests that he's not an invalid and perfectly able to walk on his own.

Once he has him settled, Lan Xichen sweeps his gaze over his younger brother, frowning when his eyes alight on the wound on his leg. "It seems like A-Xian isn't the only one who requires a healer." He surveys the hours-old injury. "That needs to be looked at, Wangji."

"It will hold," Lan Wangji repeats his earlier words to Wei Ying, and Lan Xichen only inclines his head, though the worry in his eyes does not fade.

Lan Sizhui steps forward, a little tentative as he looks between his fathers to assure himself of their safety, before his attention is drawn by the rustling of Lan Wangji's lower robes. "Fuqin, A-Die, this is..."

Lan Wangji pulls his robes back to reveal the boy hiding behind them and introduces him. "This is A-Tao – Wei Ying found him, and he will be returning to Gusu with us."

He nudges him gently towards Lan Sizhui. "A-Tao, this is my son, Sizhui. He will take good care of you." The child takes a few uncertain steps forward, turning back to look at him for a long moment before he lets Lan Sizhui take his hand, though his eyes remain fixed unerringly on Lan Wangji.

As such, he is the first to notice Lan Wangji collapse.

Lan Wangji lists sideways so slowly that he only realises he's falling when he's already halfway to the ground. As the darkness closes in on him, the last thing he hears is Wei Ying's voice breaking as he screams, "Lan Zhan!" and a small, clammy hand in his.

And then he knows no more.

When he wakes, it's in the dead of night.

He would know the feel of Wei Ying's hand in his anywhere. Wei Ying's head lies heavy on his arm, and the dampness of it betrays his husband's tears, even in sleep.

The moment he shifts, Wei Wuxian jolts awake with a sudden intake of breath and stares at him, eyes drinking him in like he can't believe what he is seeing.

Lan Wangji reaches a hand out to cradle his beloved's face, running a gentle thumb over the almond curve of his red-rimmed eyes, brushing at the dark smudges beneath them. Wei Ying's damp lashes flutter shut as his thumb travels down to press against his bitten-red lips, parted in a silent, trembling sigh. His exhaustion is almost a tangible thing, weighing heavy on every inch of him – it's clear that Wei Ying hasn't slept in days.

"You're awake." The *finally* goes unsaid, words shuddering out of his chest like it hurts to speak.

"Mn," he murmurs, pressing a thumb to the corner of Wei Ying's lips to ease the furrow of tension there.

Wei Wuxian's eyes remain closed even as his hands come up to press Lan Wangji's palm further into his cheek, the warm, tangible connection grounding him in the present.

He softens at the sight. Wei Ying is a vision to behold, even with a face sticky with tears, and Lan Wangji is humbled anew at how fortunate he is to have been given a second chance after all these years.

When he tries to broach the topic of what happened, Wei Ying only presses a quiet "It doesn't matter." into his palm, the words muffled against skin. Try as he might, Lan Wangji cannot get Wei Wuxian to say anything more on the matter.

That's when he notices A-Tao peering up at him from next to Wei Ying, the wavering candlelight illuminating his solemn little face. "You slept this long," he says quietly, holding up three chubby fingers. "Xian-gege said it's because your light wasn't working."

At that, Wei Wuxian breaks into reluctant laughter, tugging the boy in for a hug. Burying his face into A-Tao's hair, he mumbles, "It went septic, the bite." His chuckle is low with self-reproachment. "That normally wouldn't be an issue for someone of your cultivation level, but your core was depleted, so infection set in."

Blindly reaching a hand out to lace their fingers together, Wei Wuxian's voice cracks in a soft plea. "Don't you ever do that again."

He doesn't need an explanation to know what Wei Ying is referring to.

Lan Wangji lifts A-Tao onto the bed, knowing that Wei Ying could do nothing but follow. When he has him within reach, he wraps his arms around his husband, who tries to fold himself small enough to fit behind the child. Lan Wangji presses a lingering kiss to his temple and tightens his hold at Wei Ying's soft whine, smothering A-Tao –who stays very still at the close contact– between them.

"I have lived sixteen years without you, Wei Ying," he says simply. "I cannot live another."

Wei Wuxian wants to shout at Lan Wangji for his stubbornness, loud enough to wake the whole of Gusu Lan, but what comes out instead is a tremulous, wry smile.

He leans into Lan Zhan, tucking his nose into the hollow of his throat, and breathes out a long sigh. "Well, you slept right through Yuan Dan, so congratulations on another year with me."

Lan Wangji hums contentedly. Despite the eventful night hunt and the long list of injuries between them, it has been a prosperous start to the year indeed.

"Happy new year," he murmurs, affection a warm glow in his chest.



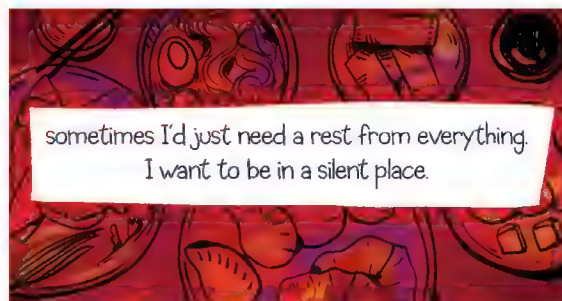


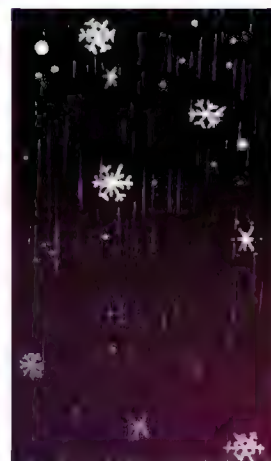
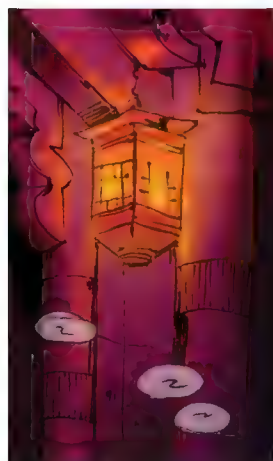


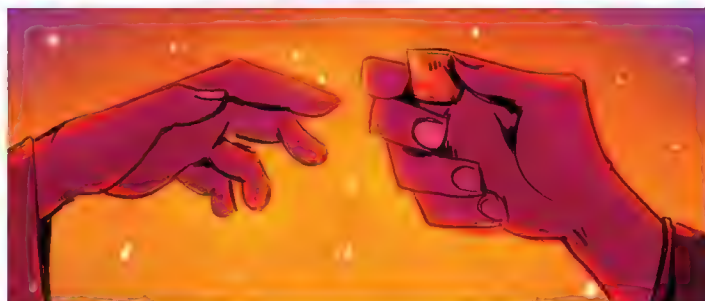
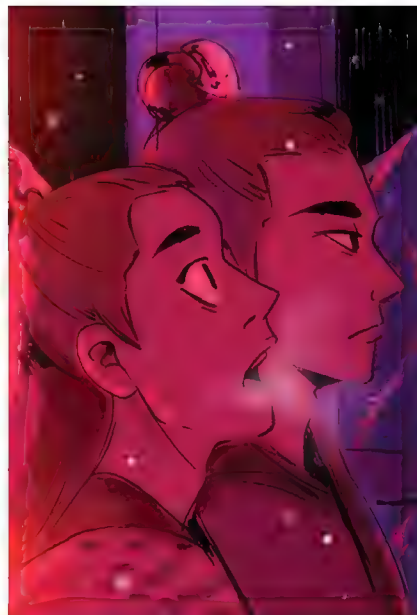












But then I
remember you
exist and
suddenly I don't
feel lonely
anymore.



This bridge will take us halfway there

—FLOWEROFGUSU

Wei Wuxian wiped some flour off of his nose. He was excited to teach everyone how to make spring rolls the way he'd been taught. He gathered all the ingredients in the Cloud Recesses kitchens and, quite on time, his husband, Sizhui, Jingyi, and Wen Ning arrived.

"I have a pork filling on this side, and a vegetarian one here," he pointed to two large bowls, in which he'd already made and marinated the batches. Each person had a station: a plate upon which they would roll their chunjuan, along with bowls of water to seal the rolls before frying.

Jingyi was quite impressed.

"What's that look, Jingyi?" Sizhui asked.

"I—Wei Qianbei, good job," Jingyi said, a little bashful. "The filling doesn't smell too spicy."

Wei Wuxian chuckled and slung an arm around his husband. "I know my audience," he said, and then added, "and the spice will be in the dipping sauce, not in the rolls themselves."

Jingyi rolled his eyes, and they all folded their sleeves delicately to get cooking.

"Gongzi," Wen Ning said with a small smile playing on his lips. "These are quite different from the ones I saw growing up."

"Each region has its style," Hanguang-jun answered. "I've never seen it like this either."

They began their work, Wei Wuxian humming to himself and Sizhui bobbing his head along to the tune. The warm afternoon sunlight shone through the window, bathing all of them in its glow.

"Who taught you this?" Jingyi asked.

It was an innocent question, but Sizhui froze—a movement imperceptible to most. He knew that Wei Qianbei had many sad memories from his previous life.

But Wei Wuxian caught this in the corner of his eye and said, "It's okay, I think my Shijie would want to be remembered on this day of days. Especially for cooking, which was a talent of hers."

Not only a talent, but also her way of showing affection.

He remembered something and chuckled to himself.

"What is it, Wei Qianbei?" Sizhui asked.

"Shijie used to say that the shape into which you roll your chunjuan is indicative of your personality!" Wei Wuxian chuckled, and then the sound dissolved as he remembered more.

Years and years ago, in the kitchens of Lotus Pier, Jiang Yanli was laughing. It was a sound like a pan flute, cheerful and soft. Many of Wei Wuxian's distant childhood memories were anchored in that sound.

She was showing them how to put the pork filling in the middle of the diamond-shaped chunjuan wrap, how to tuck the filling in, folding the wrap on each side. "You need to tuck, tuck, tuck, all along the way," she reminded both of her brothers, who were around eight years old at the time. Wei Wuxian's tongue was sticking out in concentration as he made sure not to rip the wrap with his strength.

Jiang Cheng accidentally tore the fragile chunjuan. He sighed, frustrated, and his Jiejie immediately replaced the broken chunjuan on his plate with a new one. "Here, A-Cheng, try again," she said, her eyes kind.

He nodded, focused, and she pat his shoulder.

She walked over to the other side of the table where Wei Wuxian was hard at work. She glanced over his shoulder at the perfectly stuffed chunjuan, and she laughed.

"Shijie," he said, wide-eyed and amused. "Am I so funny to you?"

She covered her mouth in glee and said, "A-Xian, you definitely put the most filling you possibly could've without breaking the spring roll!" She held up his handiwork, an extremely plump spring roll, the width of a gourd.

Wei Wuxian joined in laughter with Jiang Yanli. Between giggles, she said, "This makes sense! The shape into which you roll your chunjuan is indicative of your personality."

"What could this possibly say about me?" he wondered, marveling at the round chunjuan, which truly looked more like a bao or dumpling than what it was supposed to be.

Jiang Cheng harrumphed and scowled. "Probably that you take on more than you can chew," he said, with a petulant edge to his voice.

"A-Cheng..." Jiang Yanli said, beginning to reprove him. She glanced at Wei Wuxian, who was smiling still.

"Haha, probably!" Wei Wuxian laughed, scratching his nose.

She got a wet towel and wiped his nose for him. "You don't want to get pork on your face," she said. "I think your chunjuan is just fine as it is."

"No, no," the young Wei Wuxian said, his toes tapping underneath the table. He was smiling, but Jiang Yanli was afraid that if he opened his eyes, she'd see tears in them. "Jiang Cheng is right! I do tend to take on too much. I should be more humble."

"Hmph," Jiang Cheng mumbled, fumbling again with his first chunjuan.

They went on wrapping in silence for another hour. Wei Wuxian produced 35 spring rolls, and Jiang Cheng 20. Jiang Yanli, because she'd been supervising them and was usually a fast cook, produced 25.

When they were done and it was her turn to fry them, she told them to go and play. So Wei Wuxian pranced out and tried to take Jiang Cheng by the arm. "Do you want to catch rabbits?"

Jiang Cheng frowned and said, "No, I'll go to my room for now."

"Our room." It was more a question than anything else.

Wei Wuxian was met with a devastated and devastating look that told him to back off.

"Okay," he said, stepping away. "I can play by myself. I'll see you before bed."

They parted, and Wei Wuxian spent the rest of the evening playing in the fields alone. He meandered back to

try the freshly cooked spring rolls with Jiang Yanli for a few minutes, and then went to bed.

Jiang Cheng was not in the room. Knowing better than to look for him and coax him out of his anger, Wei Wuxian lay down and pulled the covers up to his chin. What had he done wrong? He should've been more encouraging.

They hadn't fought like this—he hadn't upset Jiang Cheng so poignantly—in months. He was hoping that with the Lunar New Year coming, it would only get easier to get along.

A while later in the evening, their sliding door opened and Jiang Cheng's silhouette stood by the window.

"Jiang Cheng?" the sleepy Wei Wuxian said, propping himself up on an elbow and rubbing his eyes.

"Come here," he whispered back.

Obedient and curious, Wei Wuxian met him at the doorway.

The night was remarkably bright. The moon was high in the sky, round, and brighter than it had ever been before in Wei Wuxian's memory. "Wah!" he exclaimed.

Jiang Cheng sat down on the step, and Wei Wuxian followed suit. They gazed at the full moon together in silence.

After a while, Wei Wuxian ventured to say, "I thought your spring rolls were nice, Jiang Cheng."

He noticed Jiang Cheng's lip tremble a little.

"They were prim and proper," Wei Wuxian said. "Mine were too round, too full. I think I broke some culinary rule."

Jiang Cheng took a couple of breaths, and then pat Wei Wuxian's shoulder. "They were nice too," he managed to say, his eyes gleaming in the moonlight. "Some round, full things are good."

Wei Wuxian hummed in satisfaction and agreed. They continued to sit there, basked in light and the sounds of crickets.

This is what Wei Wuxian, now in his mid-thirties, remembered. In his mind, he thought of it as the day that things started to go wrong between him and his Shidi.

But there was a part of the story that he wasn't privy to, that he had no way of knowing. And it was this part of the story that, miles away in Yunmeng, Jiang Cheng was now recalling as he sat and looked at the full moon.

He recalled that that afternoon, before they reconciled, Jiang Cheng had parted ways with Wei Wuxian and ran to sulk beneath a tree. He tripped on the tree's roots, however, and fell and scraped his hands.

Crying, clutching his wounded hands to his chest, he sat beneath the tree and kicked the dirt.

Jiang Yanli had finished frying the spring rolls and was strolling by with a full tray of them to take them back to the pavilion. She heard Jiang Cheng before she saw his little figure in the shade.

"A-Cheng?"

She came over and, seeing his bleeding hands, took out a gourd of water. He offered his hands to her without a word, crying loose tears, and she washed them, humming lowly to soothe him.

"Does it hurt, A-Cheng?"

He sniffed and looked at his palms. He thought for a moment, and then shook his head.

"What's wrong?" she asked, sitting beside him and looking out into Lotus Pier with him. "You can tell your Jiejie anything."

He was quiet for a bit, stewing in silent anger and hurt, and she reached out to smooth his hair with a gentle hand.

The loving caress made him break into a sob. "A-jie, do you..." he paused and wiped his nose. "do you love Wei Wuxian more than me?"

Her eyes widened, and she picked him up to sit him on her lap. She hugged him and rocked him back and

forth like she did when he was a baby. "Of course not."

"But," he said, lips trembling against her shoulder, "who do you love more?"

She smiled kindly and wiped his tears, bringing him half an arm's length away so she could look earnestly into his eyes. "A-Cheng, love doesn't work that way."

He pouted. "Why not?"

"Well, think: Do you love A-Die or A-Niang more?"

He pondered this question in earnest. "A-Die plays with me sometimes, but A-Niang teaches me how to fight..."

She shook her head. "Try to think of the people you love not for what they do for you but for who they are."

He blinked. This was certainly a new way to look at things. "Mm, well..." he hiccuped and then continued. "A-Die is kind and gentle, and A-Niang is strict but protective." He looked up at his Jiejie. "I guess they're different people."

Jiang Yanli nodded. "Love is like that. You can't compare the feeling you have for two people. It will always be different because people are different."

His sobbing calmed and he leaned his chin against his sister's shoulder. He wiped some snot on her dress, feeling guilty about it at first but knowing that she knew it was happening.

She pat his head until she heard his stomach grumble. "Here, I'll let you have the first taste of the chunjuan."

He gasped. "Really?"

She gestured to the tray next to her and said, "Yes, go ahead and pick."

He marveled at the tray. This would be one of their first secrets. Something that was strictly for him and his A-Jie. No Wei Wuxian.

But then he saw the chunjuan, some round, some slender, some prim and proper. And he thought about how they might all taste the same, even if they were different shapes. "I...think I'll wait."

"Oh?" she said, raising an eyebrow. "You mean you'll wait for all three of us to eat this together tomorrow?"

He nodded, wiping another stray tear from his face and managing a smile to his sister. "Mhm."

"Okay," she said, proud of him and ruffling his hair. "Then what if we sneak a little dessert now, and then wait for spring rolls tomorrow?"

He pursed his lips in thought and then said, "I like red dates."

"I know," she said.

It was nearly thirty years later, on the eve of the Lunar New Year, and Jiang Wanyin sat with his legs dangling off the edge of Lotus Pier's docks. It was nearly midnight.



He heard feet land on the other side of the dock. The cadence of the footsteps was familiar.

"Jin Ling," he said, rising to greet his nephew. "Where were you today?"

His nephew bowed to him with respect. He then said, his voice heavy and knowing, "Jiujiu, I was visiting Sizhui and Jingyi."

Jiang Cheng knew what this meant. He'd been in Gusu. He turned away, and swept his bangs back, trying to steel his voice from emotion. "How is everyone there?"

"Good, Jiujiu. We ate a lot together," he said, and then he was rummaging in his robes for something. He then bowed, offering an object to his uncle.

Jiang Cheng sighed and turned back to face his nephew, the one who was starting to take on the features of his sister. Bright eyes, a ready smile. He felt an ache in his chest. He looked down and, in Jin Ling's palms was a neatly tied pouch.

"What's this?" he said, lifting up the pouch. It was warm.

"I suspect it's food, Jiujiu," Jin Ling said, scratching his head. "I didn't see Wei—" he stopped, amending his phrasing. "I didn't see it being wrapped. I just know it's freshly prepared."

"Mm," Jiang Cheng hummed, deep in thought. "Will you spend New Year here tomorrow or...?"

Jin Ling knew he had full reign over where he spent the holidays. He knew that his uncle would never force him to be in one place or another. But he also knew that his uncle would be alone otherwise.

"I'll stay here," he said, and bowed to take his leave, but then Jiang Cheng stopped him with the calling of his name.

He turned around, and his uncle said, "Perhaps we can cook something together tomorrow. A recipe I learned a long time ago."

Jin Ling wanted to beam, but he knew this would make his uncle embarrassed by his own suggestion. "Okay, Jiujiu."

He walked away with a smile on his face.

Once alone again, Jiang Cheng sat back down on the pier and gingerly undid the ribbon on the pouch.

The smell of well-cooked, seasoned pork rose to his nostrils. He couldn't see the food clearly through his tears, but his vision was such that he could make out two chunjuan.

One extremely round, one long and slender.

He realized how hungry he was and he reached down to pick a chunjuan up, but his fingers felt a harder texture. A small scroll tucked into the pouch.

Wiping his face with his sleeve, clearing his vision, he unraveled the parchment and read:

新 谢
年 谢,
快 还
乐 有
对
不
起

Thank you, and sorry. Happy New Year.

There was no signature, but Jiang Cheng knew this handwriting well. He took a deep breath, and was surprised by a sob that escaped upon exhalation. He brought a chunjuan to his mouth in consolation, but continued to weep, making the chunjuan even saltier. But they tasted wonderful. Exactly how his Jie intended them to taste.

The next day was the New Year, and Lan Wangji went to find his husband after having lunch with Sizhui. Wei Wuxian had said he wanted to take a walk by himself, but now that the sun was lowering in the sky, his husband grew worried.

He found him in the bunny fields, lying down.

As soon as Wei Wuxian sensed Lan Wangji's soft footsteps in the grass, he sprang up and said, "Lan Zhan! You're here!"

His husband sat beside him and said, "Mn. Are you okay?"

Wei Wuxian nodded. But his smile didn't reach his eyes.

Lan Wangji waited, and then asked, "Do you want to talk about it?"

Wei Wuxian leaned back into his husband's strong, ready shoulder, and felt a warm arm wrap around him. "I just hope Jiang Cheng liked the chunjuan."

"Mn. I am sure he does, even if he doesn't say it."

At that, Wei Wuxian had to chuckle. This seemed correct.

"Why wouldn't he be happy with them?" Lan Wangji asked. "I tasted them, and they are good."

"Thank you, Lan Zhan," he said, turning to face his husband and kiss his husband's soft ear. "But you, my spouse, are biased about my cooking."

Lan Wangji looked at him with eyelids at half-mast. "Not about your cooking. Believe me."

Wei Wuxian laughed, loudly and musically, and then settled back into his husband's arms. "Okay, but...I know Jiang Cheng is. He might be more upset because...making spring rolls with...with my Shijie was probably where our problems began."

"How so?"

Wei Wuxian haltingly recounted his memory.

Hearing the story, Lan Wangji breathed deeply and said, "You were both eight years old. It is normal to fight."

Wei Wuxian didn't know what to say, and nuzzled his face into Lan Wangji's neck.

After hearing the birds chirp in the distance and watching a bunny hop across their laps, his husband said, "You can't change what happened. But making a kind gesture won't make it worse."

That was true. They were already not speaking. It was clear that Jiang Cheng avoided both him and Lan Wangji at conferences. Even after three years of marriage, he didn't know how to get his husband and his adoptive brother—his childhood best friend—to speak amicably. He couldn't even get his adoptive brother to speak to *him*.

They sat there for a while until they heard Jingyi and Sizhui calling for them. "Hanguang-jun! Wei Qianbei!"

They stood up, and Wei Wuxian quickly took his husband's hand and said, "Thank you, Lan Zhan. You truly are the best."

They made their way to the dining pavilion to where Jingyi, Sizhui, and Wen Ning were crowded. "Come eat!" Sizhui said.

"Happy New Year," Wen Ning said with warmth and affection to the people around him.

They sat around the small table, feeling their life was bountiful. There were bowls of rice, vegetable, tofu, and eggplant, and—

A pouch with a purple ribbon.

"What's this?" Wei Wuxian asked, picking the pouch up.

Sizhui said, pouring tea for everyone, "A messenger from Yunmeng delivered it just now."

Wei Wuxian undid the ribbon to reveal seven chunjuan arranged in a neat pyramid. They were all prim and proper, except one that was a little crookedly wrapped.

There was a note, too.

新
年
快
乐

金
凌
与
我
做
的

Jin Ling and I made it. Happy New Year.

Wei Wuxian read this through tears, happy tears, and then remembered something else.

All those years ago, on New Year, when Jiang Cheng, his Shijie, and he sat down to eat their chunjuan, Jiang Yanli presented the tray proudly.

"Before we eat," she said, "I want us all to appreciate how differently we each wrapped ours. And how, despite their different looks, they are all delicious. And that even if a spring roll seems like it's beyond repair, a little water and a tender touch can mend it."

She sat down between her brothers and ruffled their hair. "The world may change us. We may change. But some things remain simple."

"Like what, Shijie?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Yes, isn't the world complicated?" Jiang Cheng asked, wide-eyed.

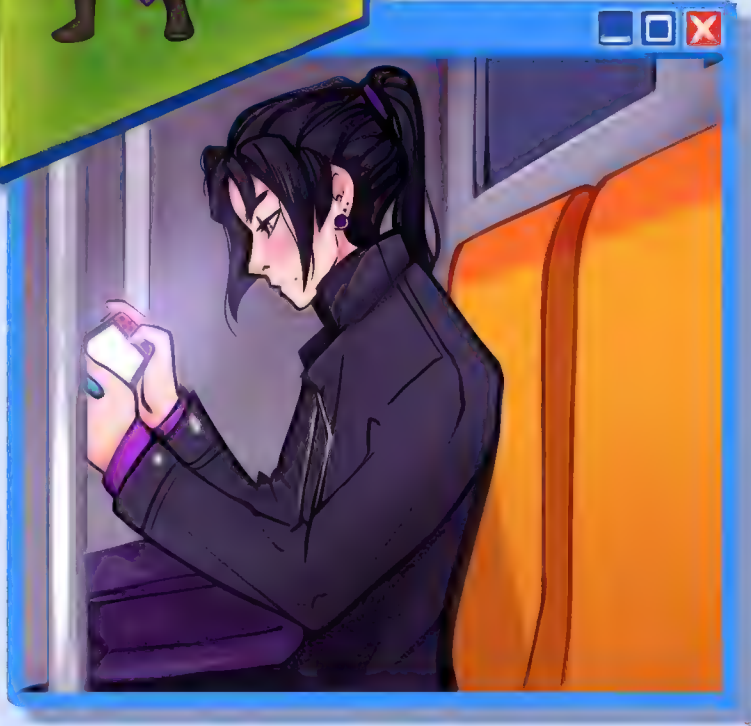
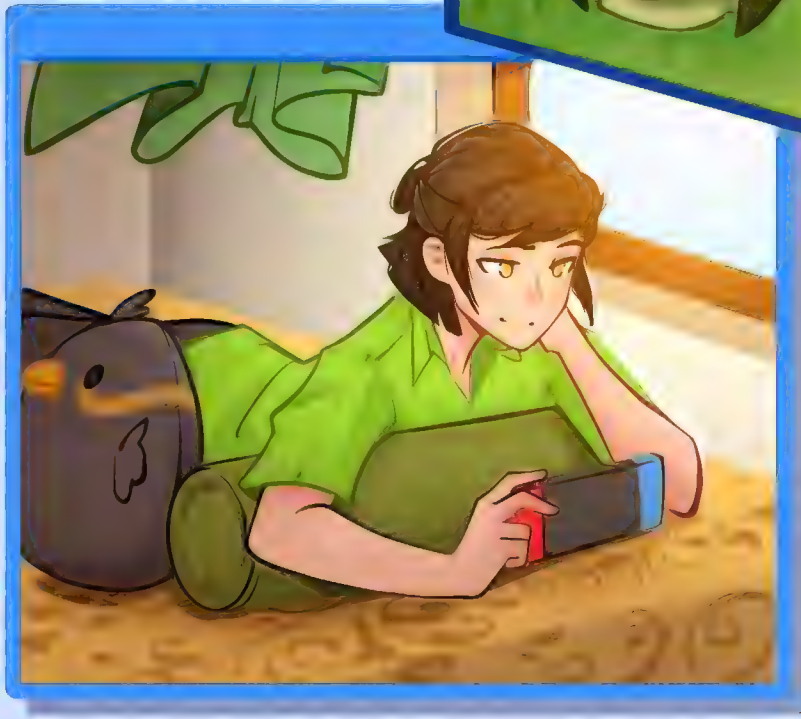
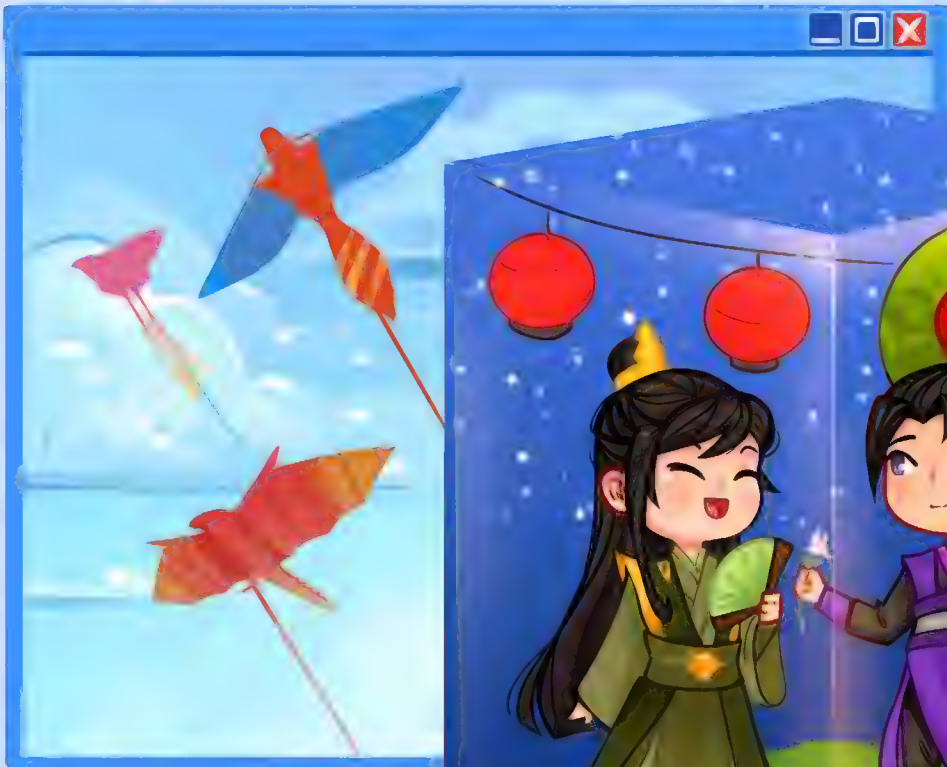
She smiled and brushed both of their noses. "This is simple." She ruffled their hair. "So is this." She picked up two chunjuan and held them out to their mouths, and when they leaned in to bite, she withdrew quickly and bit the chunjuan herself. "And this!"

They dissolved into giggling and brawling over the tray of food.

"See?" she said, laughing through a stuffed mouth. "This is simple. Let's carry this knowledge with us into the new year."

















good fortune comes
to those who wait

—SKYESTIEL

Jin Ling scolds Lan Jingyi for what must be the thousandth time.

The thing is, Jin Ling doesn't care for firecrackers that much. Indifferent—that's it. He's *indifferent* towards them. Could take or leave the explosive display at the stroke of midnight, even if it is tradition to scare away the evil spirits.

Nevertheless, when his uncle assigns him the task of buying firecrackers for tonight, he has no choice but to go shopping out of obligation to his family, immediate and extended. And it is a holiday, after all, so Jin Ling has no right to complain. Not when he's promised a delicious meal and quality time with his friends.

He can, however, scold Jingyi as many times as he likes. There's nothing in the rules for a "Respectful Nephew" that mentions obnoxiously persistent friends.

"For the last time," Jin Ling says, "we're not buying those—those *abominations*! Do you want to burn down Wei Ying's house? Is that what you want?"

Jingyi skips down the street with an iced coffee in one hand and phone in the other. His small ponytail bounces with each step, while Lan Sizhui's swings from side-to-side like an elegant pendulum. Sizhui and Jingyi are dressed in similar red *hanfu*, while Jingyi's garment is embroidered with gold that contrasts Sizhui's silver detailing. Zizhen, on the other hand, opted for a half-white, half-red *hanfu* decorated with flowers and cranes. Jin Ling glares at Jingyi and wishes Sizhui hadn't strategically placed himself between them.

"You're being dramatic, geez. They're not gonna burn his house down. It's not like I'm interested in literal explosives." Jingyi lets his head loll, smiling beatifically at Ouyang Zizhen on his other side. "Don't you agree, Zizhen?"

Zizhen opens his mouth to respond, but Jin Ling doesn't let him get the chance.

"That brand is also twice as expensive," he retorts, crossing his arms over his chest. "More dangerous, more expensive. It's like you're being difficult on purpose."

Plus my uncles will fight over this. The last thing they need is another reason to fight.

But he doesn't mention that part out loud.

Jingyi groans overdramatically. "You're ruining the vibe, you know. This is supposed to be a holiday. A joy-ous occasion!"

Jin Ling huffs, although he can't necessarily disagree. The Lunar Festival is already in full swing. Red lanterns and decorations draw attention to storefronts lining the streets. The intoxicating aroma of traditional foods fill the air and lure tourists and civilians alike into tasting vendors' offerings. Coupled with background chatter and laughter, the atmosphere truly is contagious, exuding an undercurrent of nostalgia and camaraderie.

As per usual, Jingyi and Zizhen's parents have important "business" this month that conflicts with the festivities. They urged their boys to celebrate without them, knowing full well it's what they wanted. In truth, Zizhen's father doesn't get along with most of Jin Ling's family, and Jingyi's parents are often travelling for work.

"I'm just trying to be reasonable," Jin Ling insists, because he really has grown tired of this argument. As he has with every argument he's ever had with Jingyi.

"Uh, no, you're just being a buzzkill. Trust me. Zizhen, my guy, you know what I mean, right?"

There's no mistaking the pink flush high on Zizhen's cheeks, even from Jin Ling's vantage point. He can't imagine how tough it must be, living the life of a hopeless romantic like Zizhen does. Endlessly pining over someone whose feelings remain a mystery. And, worse yet, pining over someone as *oblivious* as Lan Jingyi.

"I mean," Zizhen murmurs, staring guiltily at the sidewalk, "I don't think they would sell anything quite that dangerous to us."

"See?" Jingyi slings an arm over Zizhen's shoulders. "This boy is an intellectual. A visionary! And—and! Unbiased, too."

Jin Ling stifles a snort. *Unbiased, my ass.*

"Then, what about you, Sizhui?" Jin Ling hates putting Sizhui on the spot, but he's too annoyed to care right now. "What do you think?"

Sizhui glances silently between them. "I'm not getting involved."

Jin Ling's face falls.

"But—"

"He just doesn't wanna admit he's on my side," Jingyi sing-songs and dances out of the way when Jin Ling lunges for him, bumping into Zizhen in the process.

"Jin Ling..." Sizhui shakes his head, but his lips are quirked in a smile.

"Here, you know what?" Jingyi spins around to face the group, miraculously managing to walk backwards without tripping over his own feet. An even more impressive feat given the length of his *hanfu*. "Let's go check out that shop I was telling you about. If you see the fireworks I want and still think we should buy the others, then we'll do that instead. Deal?"

Jin Ling wrinkles his nose. "I—"

But Jingyi has snagged Zizhen by the wrist and taken off, not once looking over his shoulder to make sure Sizhui and Jin Ling are following. Jin Ling glimpses Zizhen's face for a split second, which is just long enough to see his cheeks have darkened to crimson.

Honestly, Jin Ling wishes Zizhen would go ahead and confess already. His friends—other than Jingyi, of course—know how he feels. *Have* known for a couple years now. It's not like Zizhen is subtle or ever mentions liking anyone else.

And, even if it pains Jin Ling because it's Jingyi, he *has* paid enough attention to guess Jingyi likes Zizhen back. If only Zizhen had better taste.

Jin Ling watches the two disappear into the crowd. The mass of people swallow them whole, as if they were never there to begin with. Feeling a bit ashamed, Jin Ling looks over at Sizhui, but his eyes are trained forward.

The four of them have been friends for what feels like forever. In the case of Jingyi and Sizhui, they met in elementary school, having lived and grown up on the same street like in a classic coming-of-age novel. They later encountered Zizhen and Jin Ling in high school, bonding over video games and a science project, going so far as to apply to and attend the same college.

Still, Jin Ling can't manage to go a day without arguing with Jingyi.

Jin Ling doesn't hate Jingyi. To be honest, he enjoys Jingyi's company. Their debates come naturally at this point, as easy as breathing oxygen. The question, then, is whether Jingyi hates *Jin Ling*.

They've been this way from the beginning, but the situation seemed to worsen after their first real fight, years ago. Jingyi had made a remark about Jin Ling being sensitive and, without meaning to, hurt his feelings. *Genuinely* hurt his feelings. From there, the problem grew and festered like a wound, especially when Jin Ling demanded an apology, and Jingyi, out of pure stubbornness, refused to give one, claiming that he'd 'been joking.'

In typical fashion when it comes to two unerringly stubborn people, they never discussed the incident or addressed their feelings, content to pretend it didn't happen.

Now, Jin Ling goes back-and-forth on it—the matter of Jingyi hating him. One second he has himself convinced their arguments are purely for fun. And the next? He's staring at his phone, at war with himself over drafting a simple text message because he can't figure out how to respond to Jingyi in the groupchat.

To make matters worse, Jin Ling can tell their animosity, barbed words, and stubbornly differentiating opinions weigh on Sizhui.

Whom Jin Ling cares about. A lot. Like... *a lot* a lot.

Strangely flustered, Jin Ling motions for Sizhui to join him. "We better catch up. I don't want to be the one to tell Mr. Ouyang his son was kidnapped."

Sizhui, to his relief, cracks a smile and trails dutifully along at his side.

Jin Ling much prefers preparing the *jiaozi* to fighting with Lan Jingyi.

The ingredients are laid out, accessible to everyone gathered around the table. His mother stands proudly, overlooking her students, with her own platter of intricately folded dumplings, bowl of filling, and dough. Her beautiful scarlet *hanfu* glimmers under the light and draws the attention of Jin Ling's suddenly very smitten father.

Bleh.

Dinner preparation is one of their eccentric family's many traditions. Jin Ling's mother, Yanli, took it upon herself to host this activity since the Nie siblings royally screwed things up the first time they got together several years ago. After a small kitchen fire, an outright physical brawl and a multitude of inedible food, the organizer's position switched hands to Yanli.

"Be careful."



Jin Ling shifts his gaze to the opposite side of the table. Wei Ying sits directly across from him, tucked into his husband, Lan Zhan's side. A plate is situated between them with tiny dumplings arranged neatly around the perimeter. They're not as perfect as Yanli's, but Lan Zhan certainly folds them artfully.

Wei Ying turns to his husband, similarly surprised by the outburst. "What?"

"Your hair," Lan Zhan explains and curls the end of Wei Ying's ponytail around his hand. "It keeps getting in the food."

"Oh." Wei Ying blushes. He attempts to shrug the silky curtain of hair out of the way but fails with the hands-free approach.

Lan Zhan gingerly reaches over to push Wei Ying's hair out of the way, arranging it with tender care. His eyes lock with Wei Ying, and they share soft smiles, tinged with enough affection to make anyone envious. Jin Ling feels like he's intruding merely by *watching*.

Someone, then, clears their throat. Someone sitting beside Jin Ling.

He doesn't have to turn to know the sort of expression Jiang Wanyin must be wearing. The single raspy 'ahem' gets the point across.

Lan Zhan halts and turns, fixing Wanyin with a simmering glare. Tension crackles in the air like lightning building in the clouds before it strikes.

"Ah, Lan Zhan," Wei Ying pipes up in an overly chipper voice. "You're amazing. Me and my hair thank you."

Jin Ling flicks his gaze between Jiang Wanyin and Lan Zhan, waiting for the verbal explosion. Of course they're doing *this* again. Creating awkward and uncomfortable silence, exchanging glares piercing enough to leave a mark. Jin Ling is sad to admit he's gotten used to it.

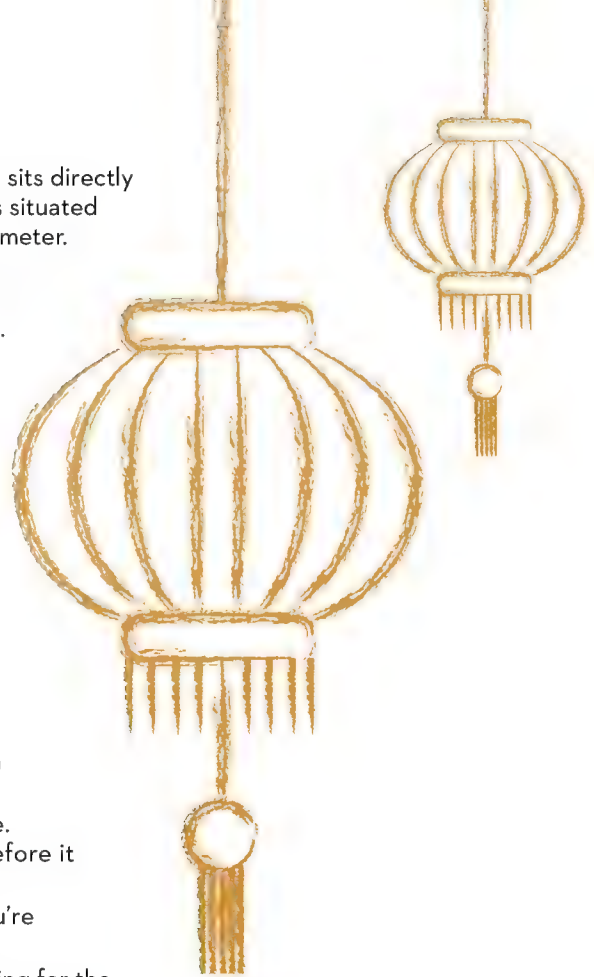
But that doesn't mean he's pleased with where things stand between his uncles.

The two have been at odds for a while—at least a decade. It all started when Wei Ying left the Jiang family business. There were disagreements, of course, given Jiang Wanyin and Wei Ying's somewhat polarizing personalities. The fissure, then, widened when Lan Zhan entered the picture. Or, more specifically, entered Wei Ying's picture.

Lan Zhan and Wei Ying were infatuated with each other, grossly in love from the start. Sure, they were like every couple—they argued. Wei Ying complained relentlessly about the "stick up Lan Zhan's ass" for the first few months after they met. But, one dinner date later, Wei Ying was twirling around Yanli's house, floating on cloud nine and gushing over Lan Zhan's good looks.

Wei Ying put the final nail in the brotherly-break-up coffin when he eloped with Lan Zhan.

And the entire debacle continues to eat away at Jiang Wanyin.



A whoosh of breath leaves Jiang Wanyin's lungs, a passive-aggressively biting gesture and his only comment on the matter. He goes quiet, and Jin Ling shifts in his seat, equal parts content and bothered when he confirms he isn't the only one put off by the interaction.

"I..." Jiang Yanli plasters on her most convincing, maternal smile. "Alright, now. Make sure to firmly pinch the edges. We don't want any of the filling to spill out when we steam the dumplings!"

The group, luckily, goes right back to their methodical process of scooping and assembling. Savory aromas fill the air, along with the familiar babble of murmured conversation. Save for the occasional shared glance between Wei Ying and Jiang Wanyin, the atmosphere could be considered peaceful. Tranquil, even. *Familial*.

If Jin Ling could make one wish, though, it would be that his uncles learned to get along.

Worrying at his bottom lip, steadily avoiding eye contact with Sizhui, Jin Ling focuses on the half-formed dumpling in his hand. As if two people as infuriatingly *headstrong* as Wei Ying and Jiang Wanyin would ever apologize to each other. As if they would even consider admitting their wrongdoings or, god forbid, having an open, honest discussion. They're allergic to exhibiting vulnerability in front of anyone, especially each other.

Aren't you the same? Jin Ling's subconscious points out.

He promptly shuts it up.

Just as Jin Ling finishes pinching the edges of his dumpling, he squirms. It feels like someone's watching him.

He turns in the direction of whoever's spying on him and discovers, to his surprise, it's Jingyi who hurriedly looks away like he's been caught red-handed. He drops the thinly rolled piece of dough and a ball of filling plops onto his plate, splitting down the middle. Jingyi forces a laugh and hastily scoops up the dropped ingredients.

Jin Ling narrows his eyes and purposely avoids acknowledging Zizhen's pleading stare. Like he, too, would give anything for Jin Ling and Jingyi to make amends.

According to tradition, the *jiaozzi's* shape represents wealth. Good fortune.

But Jin Ling doesn't feel especially wealthy right now.

Jin Ling is *stuffed*.

A literal feast was served, and Jin Ling mistakenly gorged himself on xunyu, New Year cake and rice dumplings. Of course, it wasn't only Jin Ling. The whole group cleaned their plates and stumbled outside with full bellies and satisfied—yet strained—grins.

As Jin Ling steps over the threshold of the back door, he studies the gathering amassed in the yard. His parents huddle close together under the moonlight, his father's arm wrapped securely around his mother's waist. Lingering in their orbit are Wei Ying and Lan Zhan, trapped in their own little world as they snuggle for warmth. The rest of Jin Ling's friends loiter on the far side of the yard, by the fence, laughing about what must be a dirty joke, based on Sizhui's flabbergasted gape.

It's... well, it's nice, seeing everyone here. Setting their differences aside for the night, acting like they actually *like* each other.

Even Wei Ying and Jin Ling's father behave amicably when they get together for the New Year. Throughout the rest of the year, they hardly ever speak given Wei Ying's (admittedly hypocritical) scrutiny of Zixuan.

(Eloping seems to be an unspoken right of passage in this group.)

Jin Ling tucks a smile into his shoulder and settles on the stairs. As chilly as it may be, he feels cozy tucked into his *hanfu*, kicking sneakered feet and eavesdropping on the surrounding chatter.

Like this, there's no denying they're a family. Biological or not.

"...are you sure?"

Jin Ling tunes his hearing to the recognizable whine. Wei Ying.

Seated at a compact outdoor table on the periphery of the gathering, Wei Ying and Jiang Wanyin look like brothers. Jin Ling wonders if they notice the way they've both leaned in to hear each other. Or the way Wanyin's permanent scowl has shaped into a subtle, but unmistakably fond, smile.

From here, Jin Ling can't make out what they're saying. Wei Ying lowers his voice, now, as if he realized Jin Ling was snooping and leans further across the table.

Jin Ling never saw the Wei Ying and Jiang Wanyin that his mother spoke of. A couple of silly kids, teasing and taunting as siblings do. They weren't at odds when Jin Ling was born but grew into this weird emotional limbo by the time he was old enough to comprehend their relationship.

Based on the stories he's heard, though, Jin Ling gets the impression that this is how Jiang Wanyin and Wei Ying used to be before everything fell apart.

Deep down, Jin Ling thinks it would be beneficial for them. Mending their relationship.

"Hey, stranger," another aching familiar voice chirps, and Jin Ling swivels to face Jingyi.

'What the hell?' sits on the tip of Jin Ling's tongue, but he swallows the response down. Instead, he grumbles by way of incoherent greeting and self-consciously tips his chin towards the open spot beside him.

Jingyi purses his lips, confusion written in the lines of his face, but doesn't push Jin Ling. Not like he normally would. He folds himself into the available space and mirrors Jin Ling's position. The silence stretches on, palpable with every argument they've ever had and every apology Jin Ling has wanted to give.

Jin Ling chances a look over at Jingyi and wets his lips. He should say something, right? Something to smooth over this weird dynamic they've created between them.

When Jin Ling opens his mouth, though, he's interrupted by Nie Mingjue's bellowing voice.

"It's time for the show," Mingjue announces after everyone quiets down. "A big thanks to the boys"—he sweeps his arm to indicate Jin Ling and his friends—"for the firecrackers!"

Wei Ying hollers, "Purchased with *my* money, thank you very much!"

Mingjue rolls his eyes and jostles Lan Xichen, who flashes him a smirk. Without further preamble, Nie Mingjue motions for Xichen and Wen Ning to help with the firecrackers. They gather the boxes and begin unpacking, tearing through cardboard and plastic.

But the packages...

Jin Ling squints, thinking maybe his eyesight is off. It is dark outside, after all, and it's not like Jin Ling has night vision. Even so, he recognizes the boxes the firecrackers are packed in.

These fireworks are not the kind Jingyi kept insisting on buying earlier.

Jerking to face Jingyi, Jin Ling blurts: "What?"

It's the first thing that pops into his head and far from eloquent, but Jingyi's eyes bulge, lips parting and expression contorting with comprehension. He, then, schools his features into an expression of indifference, although the corner of his mouth twitches like he wants to smile.

"Hm?"

"They're—" Jin Ling frantically gestures at the twinkling array of firecrackers, ready for launch. "I thought—You—"

Jingyi reaches over to pat Jin Ling on the back, stalling the rest of the words in Jin Ling's throat. Not that it matters since Jin Ling can hardly string together a sentence right now.

"Don't act so surprised." Jingyi finally gives in, his lips curling upward. "Those are the fireworks you wanted, aren't they?"

And that's the thing: they are.

When Jingyi and Zizhen returned to them earlier, seeming to reappear from thin air with stuffed white bags slung over their arms, Jin Ling assumed they bought the brand Jingyi raved about. It's not like either he or Zizhen elaborated or said anything to convince Jin Ling otherwise.

And, of course, Jin Ling has always been skeptical about whether Jingyi likes him. Even though they're part of the same friend group, there's no guarantee that Jingyi doesn't hate Jin Ling's guts. They certainly fight enough to raise questions. Jin Ling just assumed that Jingyi played nice to appease Sizhui and Zizhen.

But this—this doesn't feel like it fits Jin Ling's theory.

Instead, the firecrackers are an olive branch. Jingyi extends the offering with pleading puppy dog eyes like he half-expects rejection. Which, Jin Ling supposes, is understandable given their history.

Regardless of what happened in the past, regardless of whether they agree on everything, they're still friends.

"Well," Jingyi says, already climbing to his feet. "I'll leave you to your brooding."

Unfortunately, Jin Ling's brain remains blank. Empty of witty comebacks or his usual, prickly rebuttals. He can only watch in stupefied silence as Jingyi twists away, his back to Jin Ling. From behind, he appears to be staring at someone.

Jin Ling cranes his neck to peek around Jingyi and, lo and behold, it's Zizhen.

He luckily covers his laugh just in time to dodge Jingyi's rage.

Oblivious to Jin Ling's amusement, Jingyi shuffles across the yard to Zizhen, slumping into the chair beside him. Sizhui is nowhere to be seen at the moment, leaving only Jingyi and Zizhen. Alone.

From this distance, Jin Ling can't make out a single word they're saying. Plus, his lip-reading skills aren't especially outstanding. But there's no mistaking their matching embarrassment or avoidant behavior, like a couple of bashful teenagers.

Jin Ling scoffs softly under his breath. In the time Jin Ling has known them, they've been pretty obvious. About, well, you know. Especially Zizhen who can hardly look Jingyi in the eye without beaming or stuttering.



To be honest, the two of them are kind of... cute together. In a chaotic, Jin-Ling-only-occasionally-wants-to-strangle-them sort of way.

"Is it alright if I stand here?"

Jin Ling tilts his head back, locking gazes with—*Sizhui*.

For a second, he can hardly talk. Partly because he's still recovering from his conversation with Jingyi and partly because of the expression Sizhui wears. Gentle and affectionate, as if Jin Ling isn't the most obstinate, pigheaded person in the world. For what feels like the first time, Jin Ling thinks he's actually seeing Sizhui. His glittering brown eyes and high cheekbones, full lips that glow a brilliant shade of pink.

Wait, what?

"Uh," Jin Ling replies intelligently.

To which Sizhui chuckles and cocks his head. Waiting.

"Sure, yeah." Jin Ling nervously sucks in a breath. "Go for it."

Sizhui's grin widens as he accepts Jin Ling's permission. The flickering of the light, tinted crimson by the paper lanterns, brightens his features, highlighting the charming tip of his nose and cupid's bow of his top lip. Jin Ling finds his gaze lingering for a second too long to be considered 'accidental.'

When Jin Ling doesn't move to stand up, Sizhui fixes him with a look, arching a brow at him.

Aren't you going to join me? The look screams.

Jin Ling nearly stumbles in his haste to get up, but Sizhui maintains his grin, studying Jin Ling with barely concealed mirth.

What the hell is Jin Ling's deal? Why does he feel so anxious and... sweaty all of a sudden?

Once he's standing, a comfortable placeholder at Sizhui's side, he manages to direct his stare anywhere but Sizhui. To Jiang Wanyin and Wei Ying, still deep in some conversation he'd kill to listen in on. To Jingyi and Zizhen, too caught up in each other to notice anyone else. To the rest of the Lan's, the Nie's, the Jiang's. To everyone here celebrating.

Again, he finds himself swept up in the familiarity of it all, enveloping him like his favorite blanket as a kid.

He's so wrapped up in his thoughts, actually, that he doesn't notice Sizhui's proximity until he's angled closer, speaking directly into Jin Ling's ear.

"I'm proud of you," Sizhui murmurs, his breath warm like a physical touch. "Both of you."

Jin Ling's brain traitorously shuts down, then. Like it's tired of thinking anymore—about any and everything.

Before Jin Ling can confront his confusion, though, Sizhui grabs his wrist and tugs, insisting that Jin Ling follows him over to where Jingyi and Zizhen are. The night air curls around them, around the place that they're joined. But Jin Ling hardly feels the evening chill.

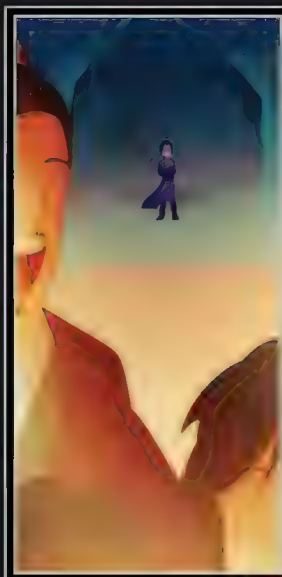
Surrounded by this ragtag family, by his friends, Jin Ling feels whole.











SIGH...



WHERE DO YOU
THINK **YOU'RE**
GOING?



TCH

LEAVING YOUR
OWN SECT'S
FESTIVAL
WITHOUT
SO MUCH
AS TREATING
YOUR OWN
NEPHEW?

CLASSY,
UNCLE.



GO PLAY
WITH YOUR
FRIENDS.

NOT UNTIL YOU
BUY ME SOME
DUMPLINGS.

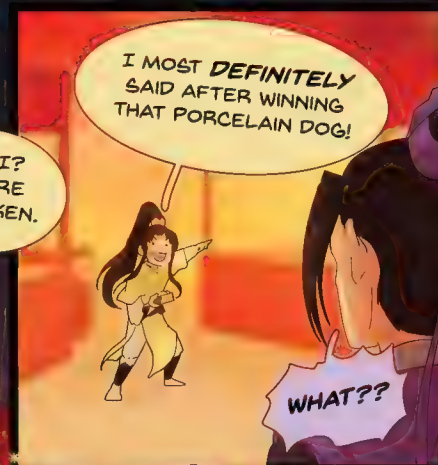
YOU CAN BUY
YOUR OWN
DUMPLINGS!

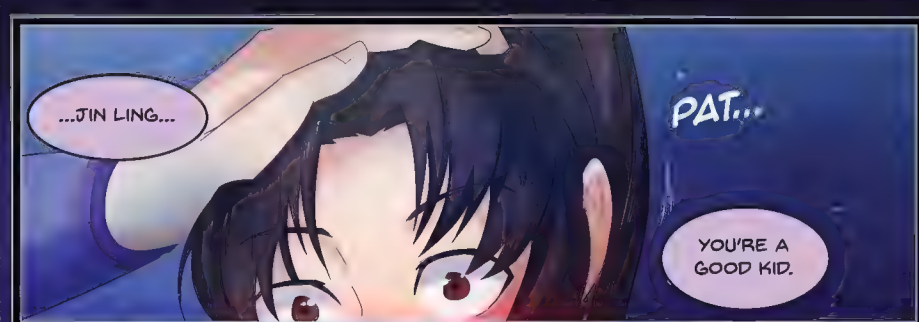
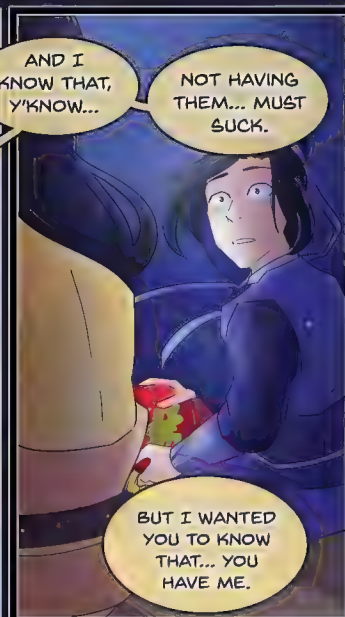
BLOCK!

BLOCK!



NOT THE
SAME!!









come back, be here

—AAPICULA

Wei Wuxian re-enters his life in the same way that he had left- suddenly. From the moment he heard the notes of their song ringing down the mountain, faint and slightly off-key and utterly perfect, Lan Wangji has had an increasingly hard time keeping his thoughts and his actions under control. He supposes, in a moment of indulgence, that he can be forgiven, because Wei Wuxian's smile is like the sunrise, and how can he be expected to control himself around it? He wants to kiss where his eyes crinkle in a smile, and that, he feels, is justified.

They fall into easy conversation on the way back to the Cloud Recesses, Wei Wuxian talking about the night hunts he's been on, the letters he's written to Lan Wangji, and absolutely none of the trouble he's gotten into. Lan Wangji fills him in on pertinent sect information, the ongoing guest lectures, the status of their (*their*) son, and the upcoming Discussion Conference. It will be held in Gusu this year, and Lan Wangji pretends not to notice how Wei Wuxian tenses at the idea of seeing his brother. Things may be less...explosive with Jiang Cheng, but there is still unresolved anger between the two brothers, and Wei Wuxian is masterful at not voicing his feelings.

It is nearly dark when they cross the threshold into the Cloud Recesses. Little Apple, who's been ornery for the past hour, seems to know they're close to their destination (and food, and sleep) for she picks up her pace, ears pricked forward. Wei Wuxian laughs at his donkey's sudden energy.

"She must have missed it here. Almost as much as I did."

"You missed the Cloud Recesses?" Lan Wangji's heart skips a beat even as his gaze catches on the wall of rules that loom before them. Dozens of those rules pertain to Wei Wuxian directly; Lan Wangji cannot fathom how he could have missed the place that treated him with such scorn.

Wei Wuxian purses his lips a moment and digs the toe of his shoe into the gravel. "Parts of it, at least. Parts of it, I didn't miss at all." He grins, and Lan Wangji knows that Wei Wuxian will change the subject. He also knows what Wei Wuxian isn't saying.

"I missed you too, Wei Ying." Wei Wuxian's smile grows, as bright as the streak of pink across his cheekbones.

They house Little Apple in the stables, and Lan Wangji makes a mental note to send some extra apples down the next day to keep her quiet. There are plenty of quarters available, due to the upcoming discussion conference, and they find a bed for Wei Wuxian with little trouble. Lan Wangji desperately wants to take him back to the Jingshi, wrap him in blankets, give him Emperor's Smile, and watch him doze off, but that is not his privilege. Instead, he sends for some food and prepares tea.

"What will you do while you are here?"

Wei Wuxian chews his lip, fingers curled around the warmth of the cup. "I don't know. I want to help somehow, obviously, I won't just leach off the kindness of Hanguang-jun." He winks at Lan Wangji, who purses his lips. Wei Wuxian doesn't realize how much Lan Wangji is willing to give him. Is desperate to give him.

"If Wei Ying wishes to be useful, you can help me teach the disciples. The talismans and arrays they are learning are yours, after all."

A soft knock at the door interrupts Wei Wuxian's response, and Lan Wangji beckons in the servant who bears a tray laden with dishes. He regrets momentarily not bringing the chili oil from the Jingshi, but Wei Wuxian digs into the dishes with enough gusto that the feeling doesn't linger. He chews for a moment, chopstick tracing the edge of his lip thoughtfully. Lan Wangji does not, through an incredible feat of self-control, feel jealousy towards the chopstick.

"Are you sure your uncle won't mind? Or your brother?"

"They may. It does not matter, I am asking the best person for the job to teach."

Wei Wuxian flushes scarlet and makes a choked noise. "Lan Zhan! You can't say nice things to me like that! Aiya, you cruel man."

Lan Wangji suppresses a smirk. In the ways that matter, Wei Wuxian hasn't changed.

The decision to ask Wei Wuxian to teach the arrays and talismans is a good one. Not only is he a competent teacher, he is also a popular one, and the disciples latch onto him like limpets. Wei Wuxian revels in the opportunity to teach; he is an extravagant and dramatic instructor. He sees no issue with teaching the disciples to set things like fabric, piles of wood, and themselves on fire in a practical demonstration of flame control talismans. He's wildly successful; the disciples master skills faster with Wei Wuxian than any other instructor in Cloud Recesses. Grudgingly impressed, Lan Qiren makes only the most vague of disapproving noises when Lan Faseng shows up for one of her lectures with singed robes.

"Lan Zhan, they're doing so well! They're making such good progress on the spirit trap arrays!" They are eating dinner, and this time Lan Wangji has provided Wei Wuxian with liberal amounts of chili oil. A few drops of it have scattered on the table, flying from the ends of the chopsticks as Wei Wuxian gesticulates wildly. "And no one has lit themselves on fire this week! The flame-control talismans are definitely getting stronger."

Lan Wangji watches him with soft eyes. Wei Wuxian is ridiculous and loud and brash, and Lan Wangji loves him so much. "I am proud of Wei Ying. And the disciples," he adds hastily, because he can hear how quiet his voice had become. Louder, he continues, "You have all made excellent progress."

"And your uncle barely glared at me when I saw him this afternoon!" This seems to excite Wei Wuxian even more than talking about the students. Lan Wangji suspects that Wei Wuxian cares about Lan Qiren's opinion far more than he lets on, but he chooses not to bring it up to either one of them.

"Mn. He cannot deny that Wei Ying is a good teacher."

Wei Wuxian smiles, a tiny, proud, private thing, before he looks back up at Lan Wangji, head cocked to the side. "Lan Zhan, what are you doing for the new year? It's in a few days. A bunch of the disciples were talking about going to Caiyi for the celebration, and Lan Chenglei asked me today if they'd see us there"

Lan Wangji has heard their conversations. While the Cloud Recesses is, naturally, aware of all the major holidays and occurrences, it is not their custom to celebrate. He suspects that his uncle made an exception to the festivities in deference to the visiting disciples. He also suspects that Wei Wuxian desperately wants to go to the city, but won't ask Lan Wangji directly. He has never been particularly invested in celebrating the new year, but he realizes

with a pang that this is the first time Wei Wuxian has been alive in sixteen years, and able to celebrate the new year with him. It is this thought that makes up his mind for him.

"Would you like to go to Caiyi with me, Wei Ying?"

Lan Zhan—

I finally wrote you, like I promised! I'm sorry it took me so long, I've been really busy, actually. There are so many more smaller spirits and demons lurking around the countryside than I originally thought. The farmers here are so disconnected from the main cities, they don't know who to ask for help.

I know that night hunting is important, and I take the responsibility seriously, but I'm having so much fun, Lan Zhan! I get to help people and save lives! I wish you were here with me, you'd be having just as much fun as I am.

Let me know how you're doing, and tell our son that I send all my love. I hope things in Cloud Recesses are nice and calm, just like you like it.

Write soon!

Wei Ying

Since their plans were made with short notice, they are unable to depart Cloud Recesses until the day of the new years celebration. The streets in Caiyi are uncomfortably crowded, and Lan Wangji feels his shoulders tense. Wei Wuxian, because he is perfect, notices his discomfort and positions himself so that he is walking slightly in front. It's a simple motion, one that Wei Wuxian doesn't think twice about, but Lan Wangji's heart skips a beat.

It is clear that the residents of Caiyi are well aware of how many clans will be in attendance of the New Year's celebrations, for they seem to have spared no expense in the decor. Lanterns in red and gold line the streets, and there are countless vendors in every direction. Lan Wangji notes with a private little thrill that this upcoming year is the Year of the Rabbit, and there are pictures and carvings everywhere. Children dart in and out of the crowd, shouting and playing. Some are dressed in their finest robes, clearly purchased for the holiday, and some are in rags.

He can see many of the disciples in town, even some from the Lan Clan, pulled along by their friends. It is strange to see so many with forehead ribbons wearing something other than the traditional Lan robes, but he knows that it invites bad luck to wear white. So, Lan Wangji found in the back of his wardrobe a set of light blue robes, and he is trying not to stare too much at Wei Wuxian in navy and red. He is failing.

"What do you want to do first, Lan Zhan?" Wei Wuxian looks over his shoulder with a quick grin, and Lan Wangji does some quick mental math. Unless he'd eaten before they left (he hadn't), Wei Wuxian would be getting hungry, and Lan Wangji knows for a fact that his favorite scallion pancakes came from a stall just past the tea house.

"Lunch. Wei Ying needs to eat." Wei Wuxian harrumphs, but the backs of his ears turn red. Lan Wangji wants to kiss them.

He buys more food than is necessary- dumplings and youtiao and tangyuan and spring rolls, enough that Wei Wuxian's eyes grow round as he comes back to the table with a pot of tea.

"Lan Zhan!" His tone is chastising, but his eyes are bright. "You've bought enough for half of Cloud Recesses, there are only two of us! What are we going to do with all these leftovers?!" He tries immediately to shove three rice balls in his mouth, chokes, and earns himself a stern glare from Lan Wangji.

"S'rslly, though," he mumbles, mouth stuffed full. "What'r we gonna do wi' all this?" His cheeks are puffed out; he looks ridiculous. Lan Wangji stares at him a moment before pulling a dish closer. He stacks food on it until he's pared down their meal to something somewhat more reasonable, and wordlessly rises from the table. "Wait, Lan Zhan! What are you doing?"

He does not respond; but strides purposefully over to a small group of children he had noticed, huddled against the wall nearest to their table. They are dressed poorly, robes greying with age, eyes hungry. He sets the plate of food in front of them and, without a word, fishes a handful of coins out of his qiankun bag. They stare at him, agape.

"Eat, please," he says, trying to appear as non-threatening as possible. "We have plenty."

They eye him warily until one, smaller than the rest, inches forward. He reminds Lan Wangji painfully of Wei Wuxian and realizes with a pang that at one point, this could have been him. The child takes a hesitant bite of youtiao and a smile breaks across his face. "Thank you, gege," he breathes, and the rest of the children pounce, grabbing at the food and the money alike. They dart away with shouts of thanks over their shoulder before Lan Wangji can react.

Straightening, Lan Wangji turns back towards their table and catches sight of Wei Wuxian, who is staring at him like he's seeing him for the first time. Lan Wangji wonders for a moment if he's done something wrong.

"Wei Ying? Are you all right?"

Lan Wangji's words seem to break him out of a trance, and Wei Wuxian nods his head vigorously. "I'm fine Lan Zhan, fine!" He shoves another bite of pancake in his mouth and continues speaking. Lan Wangji does not even consider telling him to be quiet. "That was a nice thing you did, giving them that food."

"I wish..." He hesitates for a moment, seized with an uncharacteristic desire to fidget. "I wish I could do more."

"What do you mean?"

"They're poor. They were hungry. There shouldn't be hungry children in Gusu." He takes a bite of bok choy before amending his statement. "There shouldn't be hungry children *anywhere*, but I can do something about it here."

Wei Wuxian is staring at him, bemused. Lan Wangji is not sure if it's because of his words or because he is talking during a meal.

"I am the Chief Cultivator. I can talk to my brother and my uncle about what resources might be available to help children who don't have anywhere else to go." He nods, satisfied with his choice.

"Lan Zhan, that's..." Wei Wuxian isn't looking at him, his gaze fixed instead over Lan Wangji's shoulder. His eyes are suspiciously bright. "That's so very you." He smiles, but it's a bit shaky. Lan Wangji does not mention it, does not mention the child that reminded him of Wei Wuxian. He instead returns his focus to his dish, a tiny smile curving on his lips.

"No talking during meals."

His words have their intended effect; Wei Wuxian chuckles and the tension of the moment is broken.

They finish their meal quickly, and Wei Wuxian drags him back out onto the street. There are stalls set up down the entire main road, with silk, makeup, jewelry and figures carved out of soapstone, jade, and wood. Wei Wuxian is delighted by a set of mahogany combs inlaid with jade, and Lan Wangji hands over the money for them before Wei Wuxian can protest.

"Aiya, Lan Zhan! You spoil me too much!" Wei Wuxian's face is entirely red, but he's beaming.

"Mn. Impossible. Wei Ying deserves to be spoiled much more."

"Ah! No!"

Wei Wuxian herds him towards a stall filled with tea blends, something he knows will take up his attention for quite some time. "Now, you stay here while I go out shopping. Horrible man!" He's smiling as he departs, and Lan

Wangji hopes he will not be too mad when he realizes that there's far more money in his pouch than at the beginning of the day. Content with his decisions, he turns his focus onto the dozens of tea blends before him.

Once he finishes his perusing, a significant amount of time has passed, and he's bought a substantial amount of tea. Some for himself, some for his brother, and even a new blend he thinks his uncle will enjoy. Even if the Lans traditionally do not observe new year celebrations, he doesn't see the harm in presenting them with a small gift.

"Lan Zhan, look!" Wei Wuxian comes bounding up to him, a small parcel in his hand. "I got you a present!"

"You did not have to," he murmurs as Wei Wuxian presses it into his hands. It is very small, and weighs practically nothing. He unwraps the cloth, and his breath catches in his throat.

"We match now!" Wei Wuxian beams, and Lan Wangji lets the red ribbon unspool. It's the same shade as the ribbon in the other man's hair. He examines it more closely, and sees a delicate embroidery running the length of the ribbon, in the same shade as the fabric itself. Tiny rabbits frolic across the silk, delicate and joyful and lighting something in his chest that is tight and oh-so-hopeful.

"Thank you, Wei Ying." His voice is barely above a whisper, and he doesn't look up. Wei Wuxian laughs, a little uncomfortably, he thinks.

"You don't have to wear it if you don't like it, Lan Zhan." He's still laughing, but it sounds forced. "I just got it because I thought the red would look nice on you and you love bunnies, and I never know what to get you because you have *everything*, and it's always nice when we match, at least I think so, and—"

He stops talking abruptly when Lan Wangji loops the ribbon around his wrist, rather than in his hair. He knots it securely, a flash of red against the sky blue of his robes. He likes it. He wants to keep it like this. He looks up at Wei Wuxian who is looking at him, cheeks as red as the ribbon.

"Thank you for the gift, Wei Ying. I will treasure it." *I treasure you.*

Wei Wuxian nods vaguely, eyes fixed on Lan Wangji's wrist, before dashing away to the next booth. Lan Wangji can't stop the small, indulgent smile from spreading across his lips. He must be spending too much time with his brother; Lan Xichen's temperament has begun to rub off on him.

They walk and talk and eat until they are both worn out. It is nearly too much interaction for Lan Wangji, but every time he starts to fray, Wei Wuxian notices and pulls him into a quiet corner so that he can gather his thoughts. He doesn't know when Wei Wuxian learned to read him so easily, but he appreciates it far more than he is able to express.

As the sun starts to set, many of the merchants begin to close shop, but the performances are still going in full-force. Lan Wangji has little interest in seeing the dancers, it's far too loud for him, so he and Wei Wuxian find themselves strolling along the riverbank.

"I can't believe you've never celebrated new year, Lan Zhan!"



"Mn. We wouldn't celebrate in this sense, it is true. The elders view a celebration like this much the same as a birthday."

Wei Wuxian snorts. "Another stupid rule. I'll give you a gift if I please!"

"And I, you, Wei Ying." He pauses until the sputtering next to him desists. "In any case, we did not celebrate. But we did use the time to...take stock, as it were. Reflect on our mistakes, and how we might do better in the future".

There is a long, pregnant pause. He knows they are both thinking of the same thing.

"It was... difficult," Lan Wangji murmurs. He traces the raised thread of the embroidered rabbits looping around his wrist; the texture grounds him and reminds him that Wei Wuxian is next to him. "Those first few years, all I could see was what I had lost. Who I'd lost."

A soft noise beside him. "Lan Zhan."

He does not turn his head, but he doesn't pull away when fingers lace with his.

"I would have done anything to save you. I should have done *more* to save you. That will always be my greatest regret."

Wei Wuxian makes a pained noise and draws to a halt. "Lan Zhan, look at me." He hooks a finger under Lan Wangji's chin and tilts his head until they are meeting each other's gazes. Grey eyes reflect the warm red of the lanterns that line the riverbank. "My Lan Zhan, my *zhiji*, there was nothing you could have done."

"But—"

"No." He smiles sadly. "Lan Zhan, by the time we got to Nightless City, I was beyond saving."

The words, and the resigned truth behind them, break his heart. "I wanted to be there for you," he murmurs.

"You were, Lan Zhan. As much as you could be, then. And now."

"Always, now." He cannot fathom anything else.

When he speaks, Wei Wuxian's voice shakes. "Always, Lan Zhan."

Lan Zhan!

I wish you had been here to help me with this case, you would have gotten a kick out of it. It was a waterborne abyss, just like when we were kids, remember? Nothing nearly as large as that one, I managed to keep it at bay myself, but it would have been fun reminiscing, don't you think? There's so much from before that I can't remember, but I do remember you hauling me out of the water by the collar of my robes. So rough, Lan Zhan!

We've passed midsummer by now, haven't we? We must have, the days are so long, and it's so hot this far south! I never thought I'd say I missed the Cold Pond, but here we are. I take it back, if you were down here, you would be miserable in your too many layers, Always so prim and proper, Mister Head Cultivator! You'd have to take it back to a barely-respectable three layers in this heat, I think. Scandalous!

Thank you for the update about Sizhui. I knew of course he would be a star pupil, his father is Hanguang-jun after all! He was bound to be the best and the brightest, but it's good to see he's proving himself in the night hunts. Maybe when I come for a visit, we could all go? Would you like that Lan Zhan? It's been months since I've seen you, I'm going to have to visit soon or I'll forget what you all look like!

Write again soon, all right? It's always good to hear from you.

Wei Ying

It is unfathomably late when they find themselves at an inn just outside the Caiyi city limits. Lan Wangji desperately does not want to make the trip back into Cloud Recesses tonight, and holds out hope that there is a room at this inn- the previous three had been booked full. The innkeeper nods, and he sees Wei Wuxian's shoulders slump with relief. Were he not more disciplined, he'd be doing the same. "Just the one, mind you," the innkeeper says, pulling the proffered silver into a pouch. "You would do well next time to book in advance. This is a popular time of year for travel."

Lan Wangji inclines his head. "We will keep that in mind for next year. This was an unplanned trip, but we will be better prepared in the future."

They make their way up the rickety stairs, Wei Wuxian muttering tiredly about how much fun he's had today and how he's so glad they found the time to come to the city. Then, abruptly, Lan Wangji walks into his back.

Wei Wuxian stands, rooted in place as he takes in the contents of the room. It's a standard setup, small but totally serviceable, if not for—

"There's only one bed."

Lan Wangji must be tired, because he cannot mask the smirk that curves his lips. He hopes that Wei Wuxian does not notice. "There is."

"I can sleep on the floor." There is barely enough floor to sleep on. Wei Wuxian is not as tall as he once was, but there is no way he could fold his limbs comfortably enough to fall asleep.

"There is plenty of room on the bed, Wei Ying."

Wei Wuxian laughs nervously. "But Lan Zhan, what if you snore?"

"I do not."

"What if you kick in your sleep?"

"I promise I will not kick Wei Ying." Wei Wuxian chews his lip, and Lan Wangji can see that he's panicking slightly. "Wei Ying. If you prefer, I will sleep on the floor."

"Absolutely not!" Wei Wuxian looks affronted at the very idea. "You paid for the room! If... if you want to sleep on the same bed, I'm not uncomfortable if you aren't."

"I am not."

"Good! Great!" Wei Wuxian gestures at the bed, two bright red spots high on his cheekbones. "Then we'll just share the bed."

They don't fall asleep right away, despite the late hour and their exhaustion. Wei Wuxian is stiff, curled at the edge of the bed, and in the faint light Lan Wangji can see the tight set of his mouth. Something unpleasant works its way up his throat, hot and bitter and disappointed.

"Wei Ying, you are uncomfortable. I will sleep on the floor."

Before he can move, Wei Wuxian's hand shoots out to grasp his wrist. "No! No, Lan Zhan, I'm sorry, I'm sorry I just..." He doesn't finish his sentence, but Lan Wangji can feel him relax, as though he's willed himself to do so, and he scoots towards the center of the bed. "I didn't mean to offend you."

"Not offended," he murmurs, steadfastly ignoring that Wei Wuxian hasn't released his wrist. "Did not want Wei Ying to be uncomfortable."

Wei Wuxian chuckles, though Lan Wangji is unsure of what might have amused him. "Me? Uncomfortable? No, Lan Zhan, it isn't that. I didn't want to make you uncomfortable. I just... I can get kind of clingy in my sleep, and I didn't want to subject you to that."

Lan Wangji is suddenly fiercely grateful for the dark, because the thrill of hope that shoots up his spine is undoubtedly evident on his face. He takes a moment to school his features and calm his racing heart. "I do not mind."

"You don't mind? You don't mind if I use you as a pillow?"

"No."

"You don't mind if you wake up and we're spooning?"

He does not mind, but he might be having a heart attack about it. "No."

"You wouldn't mind if I sprawled all over you?" He is still holding Lan Wangji's wrist.

In lieu of actually answering Wei Wuxian's increasingly panicked questions verbally, Lan Wangji turns and pulls the other man closer. He ignores Wei Wuxian's squawk of surprise and pulls him close, resting his chin on top of dark hair and curling his fingers into soft sleeping robes.

"Go to sleep, Wei Ying."

Wei Wuxian is tense for several long moments, and Lan Wangji is terrified that he might have pushed too far, might have misinterpreted Wei Wuxian's feelings, but just as he begins to pull away, Wei Wuxian makes a small, sleepy noise and curls closer under the blankets. He drapes a leg over Lan Wangji's, and nuzzles into the hollow under his jaw.

"Fine, Lan Zhan. Don't say I didn't warn you."

He's out like a light after that, but Lan Wangji stays awake for a long time, listening to Wei Wuxian breathing.

Lan Zhan--

Hard to believe it's been nearly nine months since I've seen you. It's cold in Qinghe, I can really tell that winter is on its way. There's a ghoulish terrorizing a small village here, and I think I've almost figured out how to defeat it. Those talismans you gave me really came in handy-- I'm glad I invented them.

I can hear you now, Lan Zhan, and I promise I'll be careful. Wouldn't want to worry the great Hanguang-jun, would I? Though I know you worry about me anyway. You're the only one who always worries about me. And I promise that I'm eating semi-regularly, and it's even sometimes vegetables. I'm practically healthy now, Lan Zhan, and I blame that entirely on you.

Do you think I'll ever remember all of when I was younger? I wish I did. I know sometimes it makes you sad that I can't remember offering to carry you or everything that happened in the Xuanwu cave. But I think I remember the important parts, don't I? I remember you humming the song for me- the one you won't tell me the name of, and I remember you feeding me spiritual energy for a whole night. You'd think that I wouldn't remember that, wouldn't you, considering how rotten I felt at the time, and how low my spiritual energy was. But I do. I remember how worried you looked, and how tightly you held my hand.

I miss you, Lan Zhan, you know that, right? I miss seeing you smile-- you do, don't deny it. Even if other people can't see it, I can. I miss the way you glare at people who annoy you. I miss seeing you try and meditate even when I'm being annoying.

If I came for a visit soon, would that be all right? I promise I wouldn't be a bother, at least

not any more than usual. I'm going to make my way towards Gusu once I'm done with this ghoul, because I have to see you. There should be a rule saying you can't go more than a year without seeing your soulmate! I've decided, Lan Zhan, it's a rule now. I need to see you at least once a year.

Soon,
Wei Ying.

It is light when he wakes. This alone is unusual, for he can count on one hand the number of times he has slept past sunrise.

He is also warm, comfortable under unfamiliar blankets in a room that is not his. After a moment, the events of the previous day unfold in his mind, and he glances down to see a mess of unruly black hair draped over his chest. Oh. Oh.

His toes curl involuntarily as he fights to stay still, giddy with the thought of waking up next to Wei Wuxian. It is a wholly unfamiliar feeling, but he thinks he manages it successfully enough.

I want to wake up like this forever.

With excessive care, Lan Wangji manages to extricate himself from the tangle that is Wei Wuxian. He had apparently not been joking last night; the man is extremely clingy. Lan Wangji adores him.

He makes quick work of dressing for the day and ensuring that their belongings are packed. It isn't until he returns to the room, tray of tea and congee in hand that Wei Wuxian begins to stir. He's still curled in the blankets, but his eyes blink open slowly.

"Good morning, Wei Ying." He holds out a cup of tea as Wei Wuxian drags himself from the bed with a groan. He holds the steaming cup to his lips, and Lan Wangji winces as he downs most of it in one go.

"Time 'sit?" Wei Wuxian mumbles, pulling his hair back so that it doesn't drape into his congee.

"Nearly ten. Once you are done eating, we will have to head back. We both slept in this morning."

Wei Wuxian grins up at him. "You slept in? The reputable, upstanding Hanguang-jun slept in past five?! Oh, the scandal that will befall you!"

He simply stares at Wei Wuxian. "Wei Ying, even if I had woken at five, I would not have been able to get up."

"Why not?"

"You were using me as both a pillow and a blanket."

The glee he feels at Wei Wuxian's suddenly bright red face may be a bit mean, but he can't bring himself to feel guilty about it.

"Lan Zhaaaaaan!" Wei Wuxian wails into his congee, not meeting the other man's eyes. "You said you didn't mind! I would have slept on the floor!"

"I did not mind, Wei Ying." He holds his breath as he reaches across the table, places a hand over Wei Wuxian's. He takes a breath to steady himself. Takes another, and concentrates on how it had felt to wake next to his soulmate. "Wei Ying is always welcome in my bed."

Startled grey eyes meet his. "Lan Zhan?"

"In my bed. In the jingshi. In my life. I want Wei Ying wherever I am." The words spill out of him, and he cannot summon regret at their escape. They've been fighting their way out for years. "If Wei Ying will have me."

Wei Wuxian laughs, a stunned breath of air releasing from his lips. "If I'll... if I'll have you, Lan Zhan?! It should be

me asking that, I should be asking if you'll have me!" He looks torn, wanting to stand up and pace the room but loathe to pull his hand away. Lan Wangji makes the choice for him, tightens his grip and pulls him closer, breakfast forgotten.

"I will have you, Wei Ying," he murmurs. He wonders if Wei Wuxian can hear his heartbeat, can feel it thrumming through his skin. He's alive, he's on fire. "It would be my honor to have you. In every way."

Lan Wangji only has a moment to panic before all of his senses are captivated by Wei Wuxian. He smells like sweat and travel and *home*, and oh, his lips are soft. He traces those lips with the tip of his tongue, darting across the seam and dipping shyly inside once Wei Wuxian opens for him.

The sound Wei Wuxian makes when Lan Wangji reaches behind to cup his head is one that Lan Wangji will endeavor to hear as many times as possible for the rest of their lives (the rest of their lives!). It's soft, barely above a whimper, but it's accompanied by the smallest bounce and the most minute uptick of Wei Wuxian's lips, unbridled joy at being with Lan Wangji.

When they break apart for air, Lan Wangji himself nearly scatters in a million directions. "Wei Ying." His voice cracks; he sounds as though he's just run directly from the Cloud Recesses.

"Lan Zhan." Wei Wuxian sounds no more coherent. "Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, my Lan Zhan." He buries his face in the fabric at Lan Wangji's shoulder and nuzzles closer, breath warm even through six layers of silk.

"Yours." Lan Wangji turns his head into Wei Wuxian's hair, pressing a kiss to the silky, disheveled strands. They sit like that for a moment, wrapped in one another, basking in the new and giddy feeling of being together, of being *together*. Lan Wangji feels a smile tugging at his lips, and he does not try to stop it. He does not need to.

He has found his place.

Wei Ying—

I hope this finds you well.

Gusu is always quiet, but these months since you have left have seemed even more so. We are all well. Sizhui is on night hunts more and more, and he excels every time. You would be proud of him. I am.

I=

Wei Ying—

You are correct to assume that I worry about you. I will always worry about you.

Please come home. I miss you.

Yours,

Lan Zhan



















— painted on lanterns —

—HUIXIN

The lanterns hanging in the entryway to Lotus Pier sway minutely in the wind. They are old and heavy, bamboo wood panels framing delicately painted silk. There is a story in the art, Jiang Cheng is aware, but he has not looked at it closely since he was young enough to have someone to ask about it.

In the warm light of the setting sun, the art is faded and impossible to make out. And there is no one left for him to ask about what it is he can neither see nor understand.

The tassels brush through Jiang Cheng's hair as he leaves.

Faintly, as though a trick of the light, the air sizzles from the remnants of summer heat.

Jiang Cheng's unhurried footsteps wade through the ripples. Dry leaves crunch beneath his heels.

There is still one moon cycle before the cold will begin to set in, and yet beneath the bustle of Yunmeng exists a fragile sheet of thin, chilling atmosphere.

Many say that the port town, Yunmeng, is a prime centre of commerce, upon which the divine can only look and smile.

The pier witnesses regular activity of ships docking and departing for trade. The main streets are filled from end to end with vendor's kiosks. The shops and teahouses all welcome a steady flow of clientele. Yunmeng is always dense with people, locals and visitors alike—patrons fascinated by alluring displays, children weaving through the forest of adults' legs, and those with little else to do but spread fearmongering rumours. Noise fills every space—from the bartering between vendors and habitués, the storytellers weaving tales to enraptured passers-by, and the musicians posted in teahouses.

In such a busy town, disappearances are not easy to hide. Silences can be rather loud. And when an entire person, and then many others, disappears, the public as well as people like Jiang Cheng tend to notice. When people notice, they talk.

Decades of practice allows him to tune the general clamouring out, attentive only for peculiarities that can aid him in his search.

There is talk of a serial murderer:

A hushed whisper behind a fan, over a grill. *Too many deaths, too close to each other. A murderer?*
In Yunmeng? When Sandu Shengshou is around?

The hiss and sputter of oil on high heat. *And what of Sandu Shengshou? A disgraced hero—*
There is talk of a ghost:

One, two, three, four beats of a jump rope on the ground, kicking up dust. *It's a ghost, A-Niang says.*

If it's a ghost, then the cultivators should have dealt with it already.

If it's a ghost, then the cultivators will deal with it soon.

How soon? After more...disappearances? A quieter tone. You know, one of the...was Old Ye's son? He was going to get married. Old Ye says it's the cultivators' fault.

Cultivators are people, too. They make mistakes, too.

But are they supposed to?

There is talk of—something strange.

Jiang Cheng latches onto it.

The familiar clanking of sheathed weapons. Steady, practiced footsteps. *Perhaps they took an immortality elixir.*

An immortality elixir? And then they disappear? This is not a tale old ladies tell.

That's not what I mean! I heard there's been something going around...some pill that grants immortality.

Another fraudulent formula? How many great men must fall to these before people stop believing in them?

You never know! Perhaps those who took it just—died.

Like poison?

I suppose.

And disappeared?

Yes...?

Don't be ridiculous. Poisons leave bodies behind.

Laughter. Yes, however...

Jiang Cheng's brow furrows. Hastily, he begins to close the distance between him and the two gossiping foot soldiers. This is information that Jiang Cheng cannot possibly afford to ignore, and he—

He trips.

The sensation of tripping is similar to that of falling, and yet not quite. Falling is when Jiang Cheng was still young and inexperienced and his stance made his feet liable to slip off the flat of his sword and into the cold river, or onto the hard ground, or into his father's waiting arms, below. Falling takes a handful of moments, enough for Jiang Cheng's heart to rise to his throat and his arms to flail for command of Sandu.

Tripping is instant. There is no time for Jiang Cheng's insides to force their way out through his orifices, only time for them to lurch within him dizzily. Between one heartbeat and the next, Jiang Cheng finds himself sprawled mortifyingly on the ground. It is decades of honed reflexes that save him from further humiliation; he has caught himself with his hands, and the stinging in his palms notifies him that he has stripped the delicate skin there, like a naughty child who has been told over and over to be careful and yet refused to listen.

Frustrated, his fingers curl into tight, bleeding fists and slam onto the dirt.

The foot soldiers have probably blended into the crowds, by now. Jiang Cheng is not so astute that he can hunt them down just by the sounds of their voices.

He pushes himself upright with jerky motions, jaw clenched painfully. There is tension running through his veins, stiffening the fibres of his musculature. There are passers-by who have noticed him, lips moving noticeably despite

their best efforts at maintaining composure.

Uninterested in hearing the tittering of *is that Sandu Shengshou*, Jiang Cheng turns to train a vicious glower on whatever it is that tripped him.

For the second time in a handful of short moments, Jiang Cheng is caught off-guard.

There is a rabbit before him. It is—unusual, to the say the least. Most visibly, most noticeably, most *glaringly*, is the sheer size of the rabbit.

It is as large as any of Jiang Cheng's dogs.

The part in him which was ready to yell if it was a careless child who stumbled into his path quiets. Instead, he stares at the rabbit in confusion, moving away from the middle of the street as he does.

The rabbit follows.

It is not a regular animal, that is for certain. The air around it is heavy with ling qi, and yet not quite like a spiritual beast. It is almost—divine.

Its nose twitches.

"Heavens," Jiang Cheng sighs. There is a ribbon about its neck, nearly hidden in the thick of its pale fur. Jiang Cheng reaches for it, somehow grateful it does not seem inclined to bite his fingers with its long teeth, and feels it. The ribbon lacks any identifiable marking, or at least, any of which Jiang Cheng is aware, but it informs him the monstrous rabbit does indeed have an owner.

Recognising that he cannot simply leave this strange rabbit alone in the centre of the shopping district, Jiang Cheng sighs once more and gestures for it to follow him.

The owner is easy enough to identify. He is the only person in the town with such a defined cultivation base and who does not look twice at the incredibly large rabbit.

"Master," Jiang Cheng says, "your...companion."

He nudges the rabbit. It does not move, but it brings the man's attention to it.

"Oh," he says with pleasant surprise, "thank you, hero."

Jiang Cheng carefully does not grimace. "I am not a hero."

"Still." His smile turns a touch sincere at the corners. "I thank you for caring for my princess."

Jiang Cheng purses his lips. "That is not necessary." He stands for a second more, then bows dismissively. There is, after all, work to be done.



Spiritual beasts are the best companions a cultivator could have, truly. Jiang Cheng is of the opinion that they are much better company than other humans any day. It helps, of course, that they are incredibly capable beings.

"Good girls," Jiang Cheng is cooing from behind a scarf. With cold fingertips, he scratches Feifei behind the ear. In his pouch, a note containing valuable information regarding the recent disappearances crinkle. The matter is not actually within the expertise of a cultivator, but there is no one else who will do it.

"We can take whatever route you like," he told his beasts when they had led Jiang Cheng to some much-needed clues earlier in the day. "So long as we get home before the sun goes down." As a result, they have been strolling the same streets for the last few hours. It does not snow in Yunmeng, but the late months arrive with chilled air and the stinging scent of frost. Jiang Cheng's nose feels as though it's been frozen to his face. Even with his golden core, his muscles are beginning to stiffen and quiver in turn.

He almost sighs with relief when his beasts halt in their seemingly endless trek.

"Are you finally finished? I refuse to carry any of you back," he grumbles, only to clamp his mouth shut.

The colossal rabbit is there once more, just as ridiculously sized as she was when he last saw her. It has been a while, but Jiang Cheng is not in the habit of forgetting oddities, regardless of how much he may want to.

"Hello," greets Jiang Cheng anyway. Moli and Feifei knock into his legs with much curiosity. Xiao Ai whines lowly. They are obviously regarding the monstrous rabbit.

Jiang Cheng does not know what he is feeling when he realises that the rabbit is large enough to sit on any of his beasts.

"Shall we...search for your master once more?" he asks without a lack of awkwardness. "Hm, um, princess?"

The rabbit ducks her head, ears flopping forward.

Before Jiang Cheng can dumbly ask the rabbit what *that* means, someone calls out, "Thank you, but that won't be necessary."

"Ah," he spins around. He pretends his knees are not trembling underneath his robes from exhaustion. "Master Lan. I wish you well."

Jiang Cheng hadn't gone sneaking around for information on the mystifying rabbit's inexplicable master, but a carefully worded letter to Nie Huaisang proved sufficient.

Lan Xichen, Zewu-jun, is a cultivator with unknown origins. He practices mainly in areas with little to no cultivation presence. Jiang Cheng has his theories.

"Hello, Master Jiang," Lan Xichen says. Ah. "Thank you."

Jiang Cheng clears his throat. "I'm glad you're here. I'll be off then." He bows and whistles for his beasts. *Retreat.*

The action of flattening the creases in his robes with a palm is purely muscle memory, built from years upon years of etiquette fit for the heir of a prestigious family beaten into his very fibres.

Idly, Jiang Cheng does it again, soothing a hand over his knee where a rumple in the silk has formed. And again. And again.



It is, he recognises, beginning to resemble a nervous tick more than carefully practiced habit. He can hardly help it.

The teahouse in the centre of Yunmeng's busiest street is a structure high off the ground and caters only to those who can afford it. In Yunmeng, there are not many who can.

The distance from the crowds dulls their busy noises. There is an instrumentalist in the main hall, a story below, playing an unrecognisable, yet pleasant song that drifts throughout Jiang Cheng's private room.

Across from him, Lan Xichen takes a slow, relishing sip of his tea.

Jiang Cheng was only distantly surprised when he had, once again, crossed paths with Lan Xichen.

"Oh, hello, Master Jiang," said Lan Xichen with a smile, as though it was indeed a very happy coincidence that Jiang Cheng had walked into his way again.

Jiang Cheng, in contrast, wore a grimace. He had just returned from investigating a lead in the harbour, and the briny scent of the sea clung to his robes. He was not in the best of moods nor of appearances, and yet Lan Xichen found it in himself to invite him for tea. And Jiang Cheng did not find it in himself to refuse, although he did look.

It did help, of course, that Lan Xichen's humongous rabbit was staring at him with beady eyes within all the fluff. Said rabbit is now curled up by his lap. Jiang Cheng feels slightly better already.

"Are you enjoying your tea, Master Lan?"

"Ah, yes," says Lan Xichen. His eyes have drifted shut as he breathes in the fragrance of the tea. "It is indeed the best in the region."

They make small talk. Jiang Cheng is not great at it, but his mother's lessons have been carved onto his bones. They occupy the empty space of the private room well enough with just the both of them; however, in the lulls of their conversation, discussions from the main hall filter in.

Jiang Cheng hears his titles twice or thrice. He lets the tea scorch his tongue. He has always been a popular topic among the locals.

Jiang Cheng wonders if Lan Xichen can hear them, too. Wonders if he can decipher the muted sentences detailing everything the public knows and thinks of Jiang Wanyin, Sandu Shenshou.

Jiang Cheng suspects he can when his head twitches. Jiang Cheng clears his throat, gesturing to the food on the table. With a tight smile, Lan Xichen eats a small dumpling.

"Master Lan," he says, finally, when Lan Xichen's eyes have once more narrowed, face tilted ever so slightly in the direction of the slightly ajar doors. "Do forgive me if I am being presumptuous, but there is no need for you to concern yourself with their worldly gossip." He takes a sip of his tea. It has gone cool.

He gives the bell by his elbow a sounding tinkle.

"There is nothing they say that I have not heard before," he adds. And before Lan Xichen can protest—because, of course, he is one of those people who are capable only of righteous anger—he continues, twisting his cup around until the tigers hand-painted into the glaze stare out at him, "Nor is there anything they can say that can hurt me."

Lan Xichen does not sigh, but it is a close thing. "Master Jiang..."

"Or do you think me so weak?" he asks with a wan smile. "I am only mortal, after all."

And Lan Xichen obviously is not.

Jiang Cheng has never pointed it out, nor has he ever dwelled on it, but there is always a glow to Lan Xichen. Otherworldly almost in its radiance. It is not something Jiang Cheng suspects most people are able to detect. But Jiang Cheng is a master cultivator, with many years of study and practice in his personal history, and that of his family.

Lan Xichen's ever-present smile does not so much as twitch, though it does seem to harden, just so. "Master Jiang," he says, almost stern, "I am very aware of your strength, as a cultivator and as a person. However, I must disagree. Regardless of whether or not such...drivel may hurt you, you do not deserve to hear it. Neither do you deserve to be spoken of in such a way."

Jiang Cheng's mouth is dry. His tongue is fat, clumsy.

"I..."

What is there to say?

Something like relief washes through him when the door to their private room slides open, the hostess coming in with a new teapot. She bows as she enters, expression serene—Jiang Cheng has to wonder if she had heard them or everyone else. Or both.

The teapot is filled with boiling water; steam blows into Jiang Cheng's face as she replaces the old pot's contents.

Lan Xichen and he both thank her before she leaves. That is the last they speak of the matter.

Jiang Cheng has finally made significant headway in the mystery of the immortality pills, but he finds that he cannot be delighted about it.

Instead, he is exhausted.

Jiang Cheng feels worn down to the bones. All he wishes at the moment is to sleep. Preferably until all his problems go away.

The weather, it seems, makes everything worse.

The cold burrows into his flesh and seeps into his cavities, until it weighs him down, down, down. It is hard to think, when it is as though every bit of him, down to his golden core, has slowed in tune with nature.

It is with blurry eyes that he regards Lan Xichen's rabbit.

She is in an unusual spot today, a few ways into the outskirts of Yunmeng proper. But she is clean and uninjured—not evidently in any danger.

"Where is your master?" he asks her. His head is pulsing; for a brief moment, he closes his eyes and allows his mind to shut down. The next, he opens them and stares hard at the unearthly rabbit.

She cannot answer him, however. Of course.

He has neither the patience nor the wherewithal for this.

"I have to go," he mutters. And then, he goes.

His beasts greet him when he enters Lotus Pier, curiously sniffing at him. Although he did not come into contact with Lan Xichen's familiar, spiritual dogs are more than capable of detecting their trace scents and spiritual energy. The sight of their confused faces when they process what it is they have perceived reminds him of what he has just done.

If possible, he feels worse.

With a loud, deep groan, he scrubs a hand over his face and turns the way back from where he came.

He does not bother speaking when he returns to the rabbit. He hooks a finger through her ribbon and tugs it lightly. Then, he heaves her into his arms and nearly topples over from her weight.

"Heavens," he spits finally. "What do you eat? Master Lan must feed you rocks, I'm certain."

He continues grumbling when he gets on Sandu. This is probably the most reckless flying he's done since he first got his sword, but Jiang Cheng's knees are trembling even as he stands still.

When he reaches home for the second time, he places the rabbit down with great relief. She immediately hops onto his bed.

"Where is your master?" Jiang Cheng asks, already sinking his fingers into the rabbit's fluff. Predictably, she does not reply. Her nose twitches. Her ears lie flat on her back.

"Girls," he tells his beasts, finding it incredibly difficult to make intelligible sounds, "take care of her. Hm?"

It takes less than a breath after stripping down to his inner robes for Jiang Cheng to collapse next to the rabbit, deep asleep.

He wakes some time later gasping, arms throwing out and against Xiao Ai, who's taken a seat on his chest. "Don't do that, darling," he croaks. Xiao Ai wags her tail and impatiently trots in a circle by the doors.

Tugging on the neckline of his inner robes, Jiang Cheng huffs and follows her to the entrance to Lotus Pier. He can hear the weather outside—sheets of rain slapping against the roof tiles and stalks of bamboo thwacking against window panes with the wind.

"What," he mutters, pushing the door open, "is someone there?"

"Hello," says Lan Xichen, with that unshakeable smile on his lips. Jiang Cheng stares at the pleasant curve to his grinning eyes for a beat too long. "I believe you have something of mine?" His hair falls in wet strips down the sides of his throat and clings to the broad curves of his shoulders. Jiang Cheng's mouth goes dry just as his cheeks heat with distinct embarrassment.

Somewhat fretfully, his palms smooth down his rumpled inner robes. He doesn't have to look to know that Lan Xichen's terrifyingly huge leporine companion has shed white fur all over the silk.

"Please," he croaks, stepping back and ushering Lan Xichen inside, "come in. She's, ah. She's in my bedroom."

Lan Xichen's eyes crinkle at the corners. He is bent at the waist to toe out of his shoes; it is such an awkward position that he really should not look as divine as he does when he glances at Jiang Cheng. "She's a good sleeper," Lan Xichen informs him.

It is with no small amount of shame that Jiang Cheng says, "Yes. I know."

Warmth rushing to his face, Jiang Cheng clamps a hand over his mouth and says, gracelessly, "I'm sorry, I did not intend to abduct her. I just...I wasn't feeling well and I couldn't look for you."

"It is much alright," Lan Xichen says. *No, Jiang Cheng is about to argue, it is not. I left her behind before I felt guilty about it and went back to get her.* "Did she help?"

Jiang Cheng's mouth opens. Then closes.

With difficulty, the admission comes rough, "Yes."

Lan Xichen's smile turns impossibly brighter, impossibly kinder, impossibly more likely to have Jiang Cheng wish to fall into it. An elegant hand lands on the rabbit's head, thumb tapping just between her eyes. "Good girl."

In Yunmeng, there is not much to do. Winter is rapidly fading, yin and yang gradually approaching balance. The townspeople are in the midst of preparation for the upcoming festivities.

Jiang Cheng and Lan Xichen walk closely, keeping a leisurely pace, content to occasionally purchase snacks



from operating stalls. It is idle and purposeless and so very strange, and yet Jiang Cheng cannot remember the last time he has felt anything so similarly warm.

Privately, he is grateful for Lan Xichen's sudden visit.

It is some incredible luck that they so frequently meet each other unplanned. Jiang Cheng has since passed the point of denying the subtle pleasure Lan Xichen's company provides him.

When he had appeared in Lotus Pier this morning, inviting Jiang Cheng out on a walk—a walk—Jiang Cheng could hardly refuse him.

Instead, Jiang Cheng tugged on his shoes and asked Lan Xichen about his rabbit.

"My princess is with my little brother," he replied succinctly, and Jiang Cheng staggered.

Oh. He stringently did not question if this little brother of his was like him, that is, immortal. But Lan Xichen seemed to read the query in the lines of his face and disclosed that his little brother was, in fact, immortal.

Jiang Cheng does not let this bother him.

He also does not think about how the only person Lan Xichen has ever spoken of familiarly is his also immortal brother.

Swallows wing above them. Jiang Cheng blinks up at them, lowering the stick of glass candy from his mouth. He steps closer to Lan Xichen and points to the sky. "Black birds arrive," he recites.

Lan Xichen's eyes light up with understanding. "Spring is close."

"Yes." He follows the path of the migrating birds with a finger. "Soon, thunder will sound and lightning will strike."

"Yes," Lan Xichen agrees and reaches for his hand. The touch is warm, firelight bright, and new. But it is not soft; calluses and scars from decades upon decades of swordsmanship, archery, and cultivation catch against one another.

Lan Xichen searches his eyes.

Jiang Cheng cannot return the gaze. Instead, he twists his wrist, ever so slightly, and slips his fingers into the spaces opening between Lan Xichen's.

The festival arrives with the lighting of paper lanterns.

The faint, persisting aroma of the small flames is impossible to ignore for Jiang Cheng, who has always been wary of fire. But the lights are beautiful, and the red glow of them in the sky washes the town in a warm, cheery hue.

He does not linger for long, however. After all, he has done this every year since he was but an adolescent. He combs through the stalls shortly for candles and incense sticks, in the precise scent and colours he prefers. Just as he is about to leave, a display of snacks for animals catches his attention.



Jiang Cheng supposes it is alright to pamper his beasts.

"May your wishes come true," someone tells him as he passes. And Jiang Cheng, unable to remember their name or their connection to him, inexplicably feels heat gather in his throat. Jiang Cheng has never been one for platitudes, even those of the festive, seasonal sort. But the words are not spiteful, and the smile by which they are accompanied is not vicious.

Perhaps, they are even just a touch kind.

He cannot find kind words to say and so replies, bleak, "Happy Spring Festival." Then, he leaves.

His sister used to plan her well-wishes in advance. *Wishes are important*, she would always stress, brush in hand. *Each wish is significant. Each wish must be well-thought.*

Jiang Cheng never cared for it. He supposes he still does not particularly care.

Perhaps, however, there is merit in some pretty words.

He remembers little of his journey back to Lotus Pier. His family home is built on land that used to be the centre of Yunmeng, but it has been decades upon decades since the Jiang have truly been the centre of anything.

Damp noses nudge at his full hands and he manages to wear something like a splintering smile for Moli, Feifei, and Xiao Ai. Their tongues and tails wag with pleasure and unfiltered delight.

Indulgent, Jiang Cheng allows them to tug at his arms until his burdens are within reach of their mouths and they may stick their snouts in to search for their treats.

"Okay, you spoil infants," Jiang Cheng says and rights himself. He points with his toe to the main house. "Off you go. Go home."

When they are gone, dark fur disappearing behind bland wood, Jiang Cheng's every bone is suddenly hollow and unbearably heavy all at once.

He stumbles to the section of the river that knocks against Lotus Pier.

He has been alone—has done this for so many springs that it takes only muscle memory to prepare for his ritual.

As his hands move with little input from his consciousness, he thinks of his parents. His sister. The men and women who all swore themselves to his family and their town.

When he first learnt to swim, he was so very small. It is natural to him, now, to move in water; everyone seems to be able to do it, and it is nearly unfathomable that there exists someone in Yunmeng who is incapable. It was his sister who taught him, holding onto his pudgy hands as she sat on the dock—this same wooden dock, before it burnt and had to be rebuilt—and told him, *Just float and kick, A-Cheng. I've got you.*

And she did. And when Jiang Cheng could bear letting go and kept his head above water, his parents and all the hands loitering to watch the Jiang heir take his not-quite first step congratulated him.

They had such high hopes for him.

He sinks into the river, his formal garments momentarily dragging him down before slowly rising to float around his waist, and gathers lily pads to himself, grabbing them by their floating roots, one for each person he has failed. He continues to gather them, fingers working seemingly tirelessly. Endlessly.

He works in silence.

It is interrupted only by the burst of colours in the sky above Yunmeng—flashing lights of fireworks that signal celebration and not urgency. The chant of people singing reaches his sensitive ears; he snips the roots of the lily pads and watches as they float away from him, drifting along with paper lanterns. The ink of his wishes are stark against the flickering candlelight.

He closes his eyes.

When he opens them, Lan Xichen is there, at the end of the dock. His robes are, as always, pristine, barely

ruffled hems flitting about his still feet. He does not look like he belongs here.

In his hands, he has a small, red packet. Despite himself, Jiang Cheng smiles and rolls his eyes heavenward. The intention is obvious.

"It is only right," Lan Xichen says, approaching Jiang Cheng with graceful, measured steps, "that a junior receives one." Jiang Cheng thinks it could be an attempt at a joke, but the humour falls flat, off-kilter.

Jiang Cheng accepts the packet anyway. It is hefty with coin, and Jiang Cheng almost wants to ask if Lan Xichen sees him as a child. He refrains, however, at the shine that enters Lan Xichen's eyes and satisfies himself with smoothing his thumbs absently over the calligraphy and feeling the barely-there ling qi woven into the silk thrumming beneath his touch. He tucks it to his chest, basks in the rectangle of warmth against his skin, before he slips it into his inner robes.

He has the grace to thank Lan Xichen for his little surprise.

Then, they exist in welcome silence.

With Lan Xichen this close, Jiang Cheng is forced to look up at him, tilting his head back and squinting against the rays of the setting sun bouncing off his dark hair. At the motion, Jiang Cheng feels his own haphazardly tied hair fall loose, spilling down his neck and his back.

From where he is standing, Lan Xichen can take in Jiang Cheng's inappropriate appearance, the water that has soaked his inner robes to his neckline, the lilies gradually drifting away. Jiang Cheng wonders what Lan Xichen sees.

"Jiang Wanyin," Lan Xichen says, "may I ask you something?"

Jiang Cheng laughs, a dry exhale. "You need not be so polite with me. Just ask."

Lan Xichen stares at him very seriously. For once, his ever-present smile is gone and replaced with hesitant blankness.

Lan Xichen's external countenance is unfailingly conscientious, as though the presentation of his emotions must be appeasing and palatable to all those who see it. Jiang Cheng, who despises empty facades, has always found this mildly uncomfortable, something he allows himself to be upset over in the privacy of his own thoughts. But he finds he prefers any of Lan Xichen's other expressions to this. He almost reaches out to forcibly quirk his lips.

Smile, he thinks. Smile, please.

Lan Xichen's question is worded with care, "For whom are the flowers?"

Jiang Cheng does not allow himself to dawdle. His admission is quick and quiet, as though he hopes it drifts away with the wind before it can reach Lan Xichen's curious ears: "My family." Two words, and he croaks. It is pathetic how he is unable to even look him in the eye.

But Lan Xichen does not seem to mind. He takes Jiang Cheng's confession as it is. Instead, Lan Xichen settles beside him naturally, lowering himself to the dock's edge without bunching the fabrics of his robes. He is never clumsy, always certain in his movements, but he does seem to hesitate before he lets his robes dip, ever so slightly, in the water. He does not take his boots off either.

Jiang Cheng has no such reservations. He drags his bare toes on the surface of the river. The weather is almost too cold to do so at this time, but cultivators run hot. A little cold is nothing he cannot handle.

He remembers, briefly, of doing the same as a child, with his mother scolding him from the table she would make his father or their servants bring outside when the weather was not too humid for it. His sister was always beside him, teasing his hair into pretty loops he never felt suited his face. His father was hardly around to be so vivid in his memories of idle days, but the dogs he let Jiang Cheng keep never let him even then.

When the cold finally breaks through his thick skin and seeps into his bones, Jiang Cheng notices it only from

the manner in which his fingers begin to tremble. Silently, Lan Xichen offers him a hand and a kind, warm smile; he assists Jiang Cheng from the river, heedless, it seems, of the water Jiang Cheng inadvertently splashes onto his otherwise unspoiled robes. With steady hands, he guides Jiang Cheng back into the outer robes of his hanfu, and, when Jiang Cheng does not make a sound, ties them close over his chest neatly. He is careful to attach Jiang Cheng's clarity bell onto his waist—it tinkles lightly, but Jiang Cheng knows it is unlikely Lan Xichen can hear it. Sandu is affixed to his sash.

Finally, he asks, fingers lingering on Jiang Cheng's hips, "May I stay?"

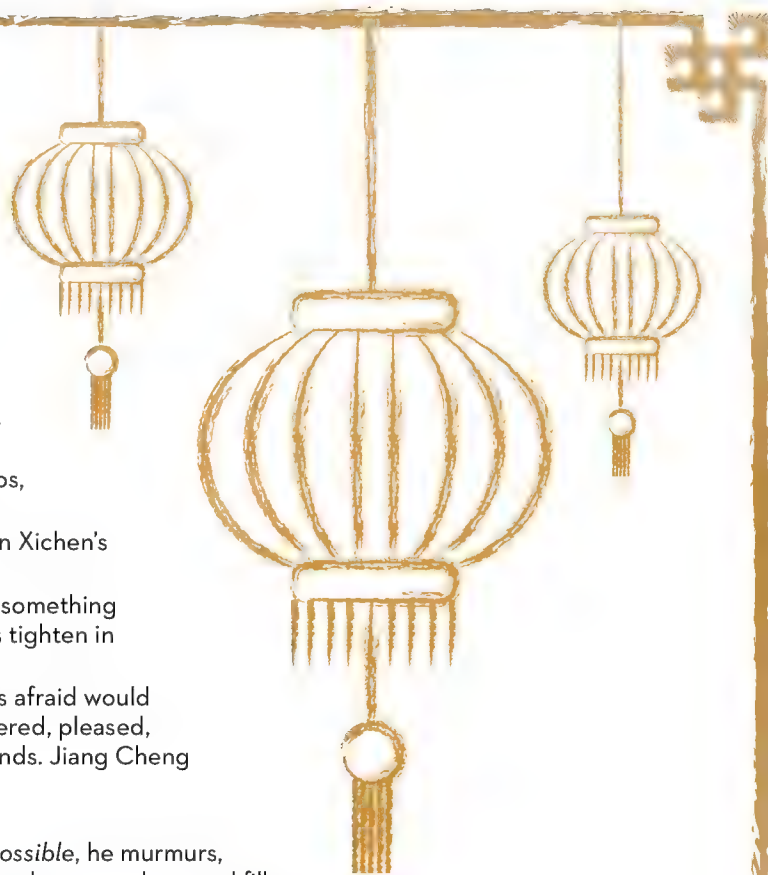
Finally, Jiang Cheng speaks, twisting his fingers in Lan Xichen's immaculate robes, "I won't let you leave."

Their eyes meet, and Jiang Cheng stares at him with something like indignation. His heart beats in his throat; his fingers tighten in white fabrics, disturbing them further.

But there is no sign of whatever it is Jiang Cheng was afraid would be on Lan Xichen's face. Instead, he appears to be flattered, pleased, and he holds Jiang Cheng's face gently between his hands. Jiang Cheng allows himself to lean into his touch.

Lan Xichen is so warm.

Impossibly sincere, impossibly steady, impossibly *impossible*, he murmurs, "This one is honoured," and the words pervade the space between them and fill Jiang Cheng's entire chest.



"There are lanterns in the entryway," Jiang Cheng says later, when the two of them are seated for tea, side by side. Their knees are touching, and it makes Jiang Cheng warm in a manner with which he is unfamiliar. He sinks into it and the comfort it offers him. "Have you seen them?"

"Yes," Lan Xichen replies readily, and Jiang Cheng is not surprised. Lan Xichen has an inclination for beautiful things, as all people, even immortals, do. And the lanterns, Jiang Cheng knows, are beautiful. Exceptionally so, despite having forgotten so for a very long while. "They tell quite a story."

"Oh?" Jiang Cheng leans into him, until their arms brush. Lan Xichen moves boldly, opening a space for Jiang Cheng to press against his side. His hand rests on Jiang Cheng's opposite hip. Inside him, throughout him, the flames are kindled. His tongue is fat and loose, his soul quiet. "Can you tell me about it?"

He isn't looking, but he can feel the smile Lan Xichen is directing his way. And, as though he has only been waiting for Jiang Cheng to ask, he says, serene, "Of course."









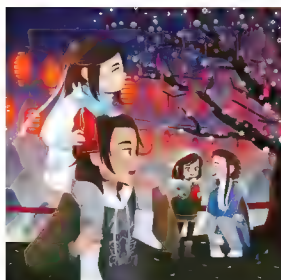








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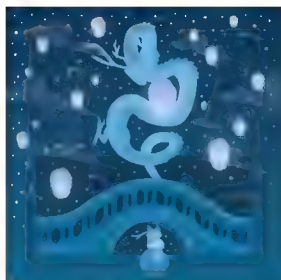
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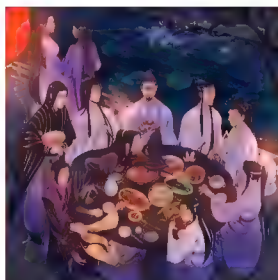
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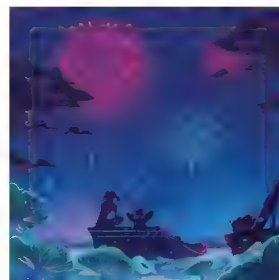
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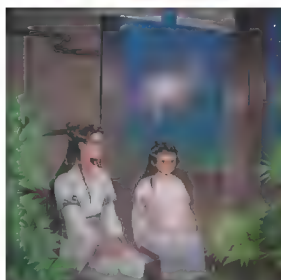
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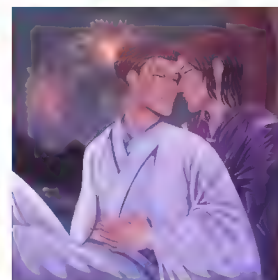
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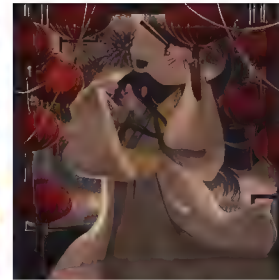
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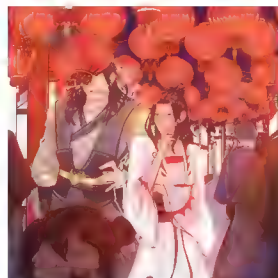
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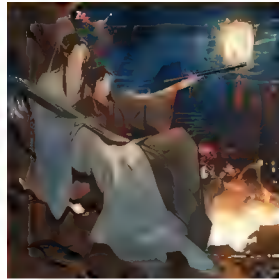
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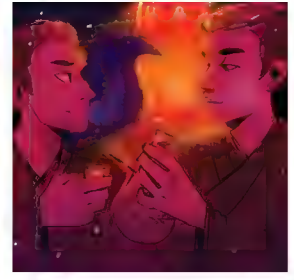
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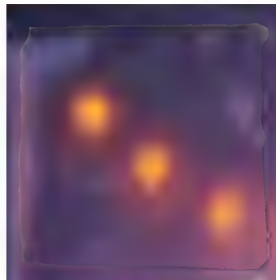
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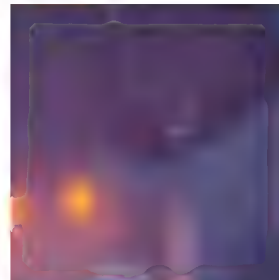
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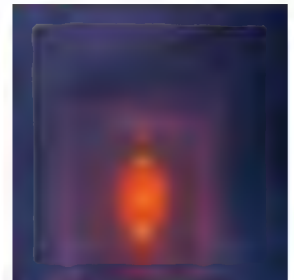
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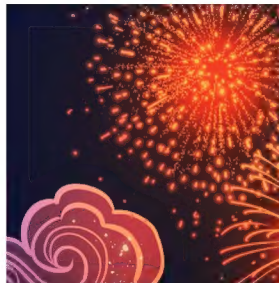
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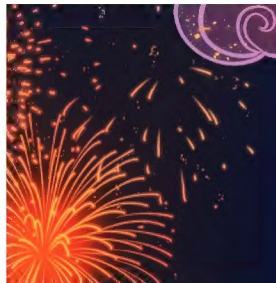
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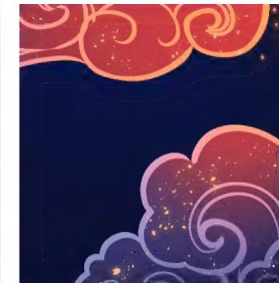
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Thank you

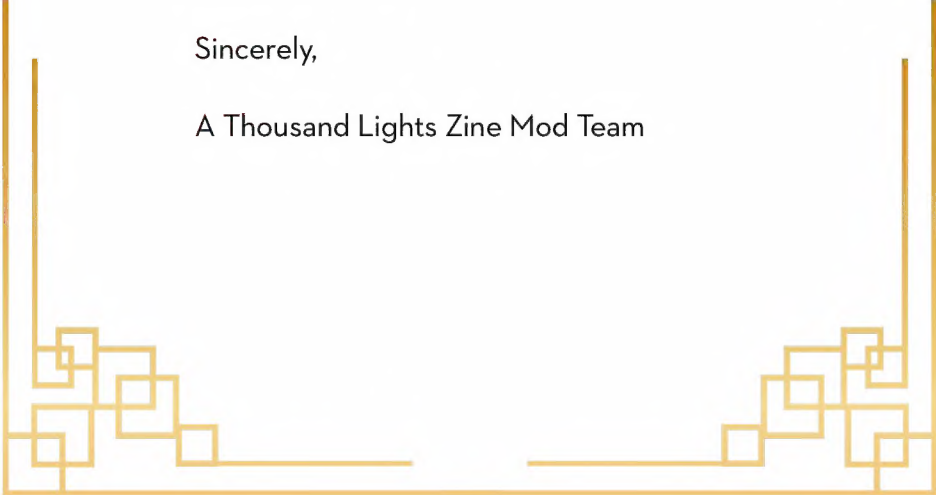
To our contributors: we couldn't have done this without you. Thank you for sharing your time and talent with us, and for making this project an absolute joy to work on. Your camaraderie and passion has been invaluable this last year.

To you reading this: we're so glad you picked the zine up as well. You're the reason we put this all together, and we hope you loved all that's contained here. Don't hesitate to look up our contributors on social media to support them in further endeavors!

With that, it's a wrap! Thank you to all involved, once again, and we wish everyone the best as they continue to create.

Sincerely,

A Thousand Lights Zine Mod Team







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